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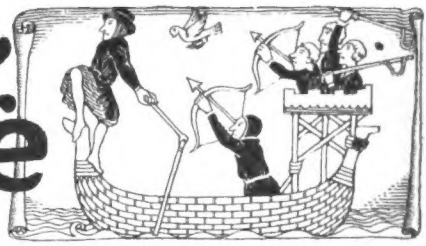

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**Occasionally one of our stories will be called an "Off-the-Trail" story, a warning that it is in some way different from the usual magazine stories, perhaps a little different, perhaps a good deal. It may violate a canon of literature or a custom of magazines, or merely be different from the type usually found in this magazine. The difference may lie in unusual theme, material, ending, or manner of telling. No question of relative merit is involved.*

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H. BEDFORD-JONES

A New Serial and Three Complete Novelettes

KIRDY, son of *Khlit*, played haunting melodies on his guitar. But, being the son of the only ataman of Cossacks who ever swam the Dneiper or crossed the mighty range that bars the path to Cathay and Ind, it was to be expected that he could handle equally well a keen sword or a fast horse. "BOGATYR," by Harold Lamb, is a complete novelette about the land of the Volga, appearing in the next issue.

EARLY in the eighteenth century there was a place high on Mont St. Michel in France where the "Nameless Exile" was imprisoned. When *Roger Domont* met a wretched man on the road who asked him to perform a mission, the Mount of royal exiles became a Mount of seething turmoil. "RODOMONT," a three-part story by H. Bedford-Jones, will commence in the next issue.

STEIN, a fugitive of the law, thought he could train a slow-witted negro as he would a child. Skipper *One-Two Mac* knew that a blow on the chin is more effective than a lot of clever folks' mental agility. "THE WEASEL AND THE ELEPHANT," a complete novelette of the sea by John Webb, will appear in the next issue.

•

BOE WAS the most brilliant and dangerous criminal in the experience of *Capt. Saunders*, R. N. W. M. P. He *talked* men into committing crimes for him. And he hated the Mounted. "BOE THE SPECTACULAR" is a complete novelette by Bruce Johns, which will appear in the next issue.

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Adventure
SEPTEMBER 20
1925
VOL. LIV. NO 5

MUD

A Complete Novelette

by ROBERT SIMPSON

Author of "Calvert of Allobar," "The Gray Charteris," etc.

FOR a man who had taken the trouble to spend rather more than fourteen years making the River Niger figuratively his own, Nettison had a most extraordinary aversion to mud.

Even after the name of "Niger" Nettison had become as fixed and indissoluble as a water-soaked bag of cement, he continued to dislike mud of any kind; particularly the greasy and apparently bottomless variety to be found at Oruna.

There were several reasons for this. One of these was that Nettison had first planted his infant feet in sand; in the sand of that part of North Carolina where the long-leafed pine and the peach blossom now metamorphose into fat bank balances, adding their quota of glory to the Old North State.

In Nettison's day there had been just the sand and the pines. So he had drifted northward and outward. And though slight traces of his Southern birth still proclaimed themselves in his speech, he had otherwise merged into the vague character of a cosmopolite whose beginnings were largely a matter of conjecture.

A second, and perhaps more important reason for his continued antipathy to mud, was this story. It began at Oruna and it began simply—but very suddenly.

AT LOW tide, alongside the African Produce Association's breakwater at Oruna, a canoe was likely to get itself into difficulties in the slimy ooze which an eleven-foot tidal drop left in its wake.

This circumstance should not have affected Nettison to any extent. For, by virtue of his color, if not exactly his prestige, he was entitled to use the A. P. A. gig-wharf as a landing place, particularly since it was his habit to go out upon the waters of the Niger in a launch.

It was his own launch, and no one between Kano and the Bight of Benin disputed his possession, greatly because it was not the kind of property that encouraged the sin of envy.

Horse lovers who gazed upon it for the first time, were vaguely reminded of a hammer-headed piebald that appeared to have no body to speak of behind the shoulders, but which could unlimber a surprizing turn of speed upon occasion.

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To be more definite, Nettison's launch lacked paint in large spots, and where there did happen to be paint, it was not always of the same color. And the engine was strictly and exclusively Nettison's. It disdained outside interference and no outsider had as yet developed patience enough to arouse the vital spark in its altogether debatable interior.

This much mention of the launch is made because Nettison arrived at the breakwater at Oruna in an eight paddle canoe; a circumstance that was remarkable enough to act as a perfectly good beginning for any story.

But the tale did not really begin until the canoe became involved in the mud.

When this happened, and Nettison had to make his way ashore across an improvised bridge consisting of a three-by-nine-inch deal board, life, for Nettison and various other widely diversified personalities, began to move in a new and unthought of direction

Of course there was nothing particularly remarkable or funny in the sight of a white man balancing himself on a wabbly nine-by-three deal. But the native of West Africa, and specifically of the Niger Delta swamps —Jakri, Sobo, Bini, Brass, Ibani, whatnot— led a sad and seamy life and always, as a matter of necessity, tried to see the humorous side of things.

Therefore, the spectacle of so great a man as Niger Nettison balancing himself on his none-too-secure deal bridge, amused not a few of the natives round about.

Some of these natives, Jakri and Ijo for the greater part, were in canoes preparing to make their departure from the beach after having disposed of their palm nut kernels and palm oil to Delton, the A. P. A. agent.

Others were waiting to complete the business of taking pay for the produce they had sold, and the rather bulky remainder were simply idling drones of both sexes, slouching under the kernel store awning or lolling about the beach, helping their more industrious trader friends to make a noise over the always too small earnings of the day.

Naturally, having nothing else to do, it was the loafing members of the native spectators who laughed at Nettison first. The others, parrot-like, merely followed suit.

When Nettison was three-fourths of the way across the "bridge," the narrow plank wabbled crazily, and his efforts to preserve his equilibrium made the laughter lift, as by common consent, into a loud and wide-mouthed guffaw.

Then the plank stopped wabbling, and Nettison steadied and straightened; but nothing more than this. Yet the laughter died as though Nettison had become possessed of a Gargantuan hand that had sealed every mouth on the beach.

On the surface, at least, there was no extraordinary reason for so sudden and so noticeable an effect. Nettison was not a particularly big man; in the middle-to-light heavyweight class, rather slim of build though broad of shoulder, unusually quiet and mild of expression, and generally believed, under normal circumstances, to be of a tolerant disposition toward both white and black.

His only outward mark of distinction was the revolver he carried; not because it was an unusual revolver but simply because it was slung from his waist in plain sight at all times.

White men, even those in the Government's employ, did not carry revolvers as a rule. Traders never did. Nettison, who was neither a trader nor a Government man, not only carried a gun which every one could see, but was believed to have several others of various sizes and degrees of destruction scattered about his person.

Also, his reputation for making use of them ranged from the one notch everybody knew about, to a thousand or two, according to the willingness of the individual imagination to make the most of a spectacular and heroic possibility.

In this instance his hand did not move toward the gun. Nor did he make a hostile motion of any sort; simply stopped walking his plank and looked the situation over slowly from left to right.

This done, and amid a silence that did not even whisper, he went on again, reached the beach and walked quietly toward the stairs leading up to the A. P. A. white men's living quarters.

He did not swagger. Although the life he had led was considered a trifle too sensational and haphazard to be altogether free from the vice of self-advertisement, there was not at any time a braggart bone in Niger Nettison's body.

But it was known or believed that the things he did, whether in unexpected kindness or in not quite so unexpected rebuttal,

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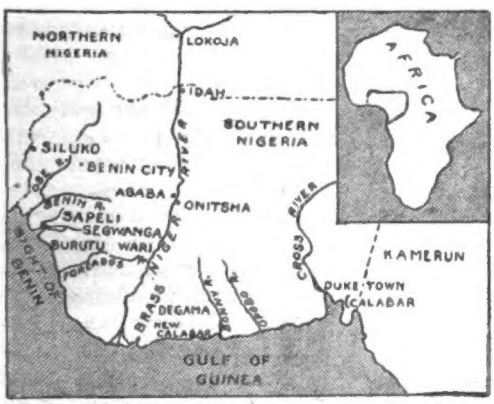
were done without much, if any, preliminary thought on his part; and the ragged lane of natives through which he walked gave heed to his right hand and foot just as a matter of ordinary caution.

About half way up the scattered lines, Nettison booted Orcada.

And it happened just like that; without any exclamation point, and without malice or anger, but simply and casually, and almost absent-mindedly, in the interests of white domination.

Orcada needed booting by some one or other most of the time and possibly expected it. So he howled after his fashion and jumped and got out of the way, while



Nettison, to indicate impartiality, booted some one else who seemed rather truculent and who did not skedaddle quickly enough.

Then, having thus harmlessly gestured for the sake of discipline, Nettison passed on.

Three steps. Or it may have been just two. Nettison was not counting. He heard a short, thick guttural of rage behind him and a sudden, hissing breath of astonishment that surged all about him, but seemed particularly to rush in upon him from the rear.

He whirled, and the glint of the gun in his hand whirled in a slightly wider circle with him, make scurrying, naked feet slap the hard *chic-coco* surface of the beach with a sound that was not unlike applause.

Then the roar of the revolver and the flash of a knife that, to Nettison, appeared to leap out of the sun at him, merged for a second or two then separated.

The knife jangled earthward. The gun also drooped, but stopped; even though a red stream poured down Nettison's forearm, flooding the cupped palm of his hand. But he was not seeing this, and neither was any one else.

For Tola, the son of Masai, was dead at Nettison's feet.

II

THE beginning, therefore, though riotous, was simple enough.

Nettison was not aware it had been Tola he had booted until he saw him curling up so queerly at his feet. Not that Tola's identity would have mattered if Nettison had wanted to kick him badly enough. He would have kicked Masai himself if the occasion warranted it.

And Masai, who was a chief of vast dimensions, politically as well as physically, had not yet been kicked by any one.

However, Nettison was not giving Masai a thought just then. He was looking down at Tola with an expression of quiet wonder upon his broad, naturally pale face; wonder that was not unmixed with pity.

From Nettison's viewpoint there had been no offense intended. He had made what was simply an habitual and subconscious gesture in the interests of discipline. and Tola, altogether alive but a moment before, was now—

Why, the thing was not just a killing. It was a tragedy.

Perhaps Tola had had too much palm wine. Perhaps some other white man had rubbed him raw earlier in the day. There was no saying just why Tola should have leaped and struck simply because a white man's boot had scraped his thigh. And when Nettison's glance lifted and moved slowly and inquiringly about him, he found himself in the center of a wide ring that became still wider wherever his unhurried gray eyes rested.

But evidently none of the shrinking natives about him was less surprized at Tola's sudden and murderous attack than he. All around him Nettison could see a circle of interrogation points, each of them apparently asking the same question that troubled him.

A little beyond the circling black faces, he saw the lean, pale face of the A. P. A. kernel clerk who stood in the kernel house doorway; and saw the languid appearing shop clerk standing on the concrete slab outside the shop door, just as if he had become a part of it. Then Nettison's eyes

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lifted still higher to the house veranda immediately over the shop clerk's head.

And found Tarkman.

At Tarkman's side, leaning over the veranda rail, was Delton, the A. P. A. agent; a heavy, good-natured man who loaned Nettison money and still managed to retain Nettison's respect.

Just then, Delton's heavy lower jaw was sagging woefully, but Nettison scarcely paid any attention to this, because Tarkman was grinning somewhat as a wolf grins; and this, in Tarkman particularly, was not at all beautiful.

He was the district commissioner at Oruna; a rather heavily judicial, brusquely intimate man, with large and glistening teeth and prominent dark brown eyes. In Oruna, he was the solemn and somewhat somnolent representative of the law, and that he appeared to be grinning in ghoulish anticipation of having to arrest Nettison for another killing, did not fit in with his character at all.

Therefore, Nettison regarded Tarkman's grin for a few lengthy seconds; then, without giving the slightest indication of what he thought of it, he managed to replace his gun in its holster and, turning in the direction of the stairs, walked toward them just as he had originally intended.

The circle of natives broke immediately and the A. P. A. shop clerk, coming suddenly to life, separated himself from his slab of concrete and ran toward Nettison.

"What the deuce happened? Is he dead? Did you shoot him? Look at your arm!"

Nettison looked and passed on.

"All right. Delton'll fix me up. But I'd close that shop door if I were you, or those fellows will steal you out of a job."

He began to climb the stairs, leaving a spotted red trail behind him, and Delton lumbered down to meet him. Tarkman, however, faded into the background somewhere, the thump of his heavy heels on the pitch pine flooring being distinctly audible to Nettison.

"What did you shoot him for, you —— fool?" Delton asked *sotto voice* in his fat and privileged way. "Who is he?"

"Tola."

"Tola! And on my beach! Why you blithering idiot—lord! What a messy looking arm! Boy! Here, Nettison, wait a second. What's a shirt sleeve between friends?"

"Save your shirt, Delton," Tarkman's voice interrupted from the top of the stairs. "These napkins I found in the dining-room sideboard will be better. And I've told a boy to boil some water. Sit down, Nettison, and give me a chance to practise some first aid on you."

Nettison nodded acknowledgment in his customary lazy way. "Sloppy looking job, isn't it? Guess the knife must have thought it was a plough. Where'll I sit? This step be all right for you?"

Tarkman indicated that it would. There was no trace of his grin now. Yet as Delton announced his intention to go down to the beach to find out the whole truth about Tola, Nettison observed that Tarkman's glance followed the trading agent somewhat nervously and that for a second perhaps, the big white teeth flashed in another wholly uncalled for grin.

It was after this that Nettison gave his attention to Tarkman's hands.

In the tropics on a diet of five grain quinine pills and, very possibly, various alcoholic supplementals, no man's hand is as steady as he would like it to be, and Tarkman's was no exception; particularly as he tried to stop the flow of blood from the jagged cut in Nettison's forearm.

In fact, had Nettison not known Tarkman better, he would have concluded the D. C. had been tilting his little finger far into the night for many nights, and that the stuff he had been drinking had been undefiled by any temperate ingredient.

But Tarkman's eyes were clear enough and his face was free from any hint of puffiness; and, though he worked without the aid of conversation, there was nothing unusual in this, since his spells of silence were generally known to be as long and profound as they were often and exasperatingly unexpected.

Even when Delton came up from the beach again, looking so funereal that questions were unnecessary, Tarkman accorded him nothing more than the acknowledgment of a quick interrogative glance and said briefly—

"Iodine."

Delton grunted and fetched it, and for several minutes thereafter, even the rising and falling chatter on the beach below seemed to have a decent respect for Nettison's misery. Presently, however, Tarkman said as he adjusted Nettison's arm in a sling:

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"That'll be all right till Armsley gets up from Noala. He ought to be back in an hour. Meantime—"

"Let's have a drink," Delton suggested gruffly, at the same time mumbling an order to a waiting Kroo-boy steward to wash the stairs.

Tarkman did not seem to hear Delton's invitation. He paused a moment to glance down at a solemn little procession on the beach below, then, in spite of Delton's remark to the effect that there was nothing he could do down there, the D. C. turned his back upon Delton's offer of a drink and followed the path of duty which led in the direction of the A. P. A. oil yard.

And Nettison, without being asked to do so, followed Tarkman.

"Don't you know when you've had enough?" the A. P. A. agent grumbled as he lumbered after Nettison, caught up with him and took hold of his good arm in case he needed steadying. "What do you want to take another look at it for?"

Nettison did not answer this and, as he again ran the gauntlet of staring eyes and whispering tongues on his way to the A. P. A. oil yard, where the earthly remains of Tola had been carried, he did not think it necessary to inform Delton that his interest was not in the dead son of Masai, but in Oruna's district commissioner.

There was something wrong with Tarkman. Just what it was, Nettison did not seem to have the slightest idea, but he did know, just as if Tarkman had told him so, that, for some reason or other, the D. C. was glad that Tola was dead.

It was a rather hideous kind of gladness, too, that left Tarkman visibly shaking with relief and gratitude. In fact, though Nettison could not have adequately explained it, he had a most distinct sensation of having done Tarkman a great favor, and that the D. C.—aside from the neat and thorough job he had done on Nettison's arm—was going to express his gratitude, directly or indirectly, sooner or later.

So Nettison followed Tarkman into the A. P. A. oil yard, and while the D. C. officially verified the identity and death of Tola, Nettison was careful to keep his eyes fixed upon Tarkman and paid little or no attention to the body.

And then he saw the D. C.'s eyes close for a second or two, saw his lips move silently and saw his right hand, which had involuntarily clenched, slowly relax—just as if Tarkman were exhaling a long, deep breath of relief.

Then Tarkman was firing questions to right and left of him into the semicircle of natives round about; questions that were couched in terms that had a decided tendency to insist upon the unhappy affair being regarded by all and sundry as the result of a fit of temporary insanity on Tola's part.

Delton, who was standing at Nettison's side, nudged him significantly after a little while and mumbled:

"Tark's fixing it for you. I'll bet you owe him money."

Nettison scarcely heard this. He was too much interested in Tarkman's efforts to make a swagger looking, skeptical and reticent friend of Tola's admit that Tola had had no justification for using a knife.

"Suppose white man kick you, li'l bit," Tarkman was saying. "You go catch knife? Or you? Or you? Or *you?*"

The D. C.'s eyes leaped challengingly from native to native demanding a negative reply; just as if he were the counsel for the defence instead of the prosecution as he should have been.

"Of course not! What's matter Tola go catch knife for li'l bit so-so kick? He drink gin too much? Or tombo? Or he no catch propah woman? Which man go *savez?* Plenty man go craze for gin or for woman, but no man go craze for li'l bit so-so kick."

Then, as if this settled the matter, he turned abruptly to Nettison and said gruffly—

"I'll want you to come along to my office and let me have your side of it."

"All right. Whenever you're ready."

"And Delton?"

"Yes?"

"Let them take it away any time they want to. And if Masai pays you a visit—"

"It'll be the first in more than five years."

"Why?"

"Does all his business with Marsden and the Oruna Oil people, and he has no use for me socially. I think he's jealous of my fat. He's no more circular than I am, but I'm bigger and weigh more."

Tarkman did not smile. Neither did Nettison. He knew Delton was trying to make light of a circumstance that, in view of Chief Masai's attitude toward the A. P. A beach, would now take on a more serious aspect. And, if it did nothing else, it

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would surely have a most depressing effect upon the amount of business Delton would do in the near future.

This did not tend to improve the position in which Nettison found himself, and his brows contracted and threw a shadow over his gray eyes as he turned with Delton to follow Tarkman from the oil yard. But he did not commiserate with Delton or attempt an apology. For he knew the big A. P. A. agent would have resented this more than he deplored the killing of Tola on his beach.

"Want that drink now?" Delton demanded when they had reached the foot of the house stairway again.

Tarkman had stopped as if he were undecided about something or other, and did not seem to hear what Delton had said.

"I never ask a man three times," Delton warned. "The second time's bad enough."

"Er—oh—yes—no, no thanks. Not now, old man. I'll—er—charge it."

The grin that accompanied this was not pretty to see, but it disappeared so quickly that only Nettison gathered any of its significance.

"Sorry about the Masai business. Rotten luck. But I'll see what I can do to straighten it out. Er—ah—let's get along Nettison—please."

Nettison nodded, muttered a casual "I'll be back" to Delton and, without further ado, accompanied Tarkman down to the gig-wharf where the D. C.'s launch was waiting.

Delton did not go with them. He paused for a while until they had turned the corner of the house, then climbed the stairs and proceeded to the far corner of the veranda where he could watch the government launch make its way up river. Presently he might have been heard to mutter:

"Please—eh? Please? Hunh. That's a —— of a way to take a man to jail."

III

NETTISON had none of the sensations of going to jail as he sat in the little cabin of the launch watching Tarkman smoke cigarets on a three to one ratio.

The Government beach, which was situated on the Daraka curve of the Oruna River, lay about two miles beyond the A. P. A. beach; and for almost every foot of the distance Tarkman exuded smoke, as though he were trying to create a screen between himself and Nettison.

Every little while he would make a staccato remark that, aside from being of no importance, apparently required no answer; at least, Tarkman paid no attention to Nettison's monosyllabic replies. Once he asked—

"How's the arm?"

"Fine. I guess Armsley won't—"

But Tarkman was not listening. He was lighting another cigaret in an absent-minded fashion and came to life again with a jerk and the unnecessary remark—

"Nasty business."

"Afraid so." Nettison agreed. "An ugly fat man is a whole lot worse than an ugly thin one."

"Masai?"

Nettison nodded.

"I'm darn sorry it happened on Delton's beach. That won't soften the blow any, and Delton—"

But again Tarkman was not listening, so Nettison allowed the remainder of what he wanted to say to drone off into nothingness behind a smoke screen of his own making.

Presently the D. C. rose, walked to the companion of the little cabin, looked out on deck a moment or two, then came back and sat down beside Nettison. A rather nervous hand reached out and rested on Nettison's knee.

"Self-defense, eh? No doubt about that?"

Nettison indicated his crippled right arm.

"I got this first. Had to get it first, or he couldn't have done it at all. I'm sorry for the poor beggar, and—"

"Sorry?" Tarkman's hand drew away from Nettison's knee with a hesitant gesture of unbelief. "Sorry?" And Tarkman grinned again. "That's —— funny, Nettison. Funniest thing I've heard in—what in ——'s name are you sorry for?"

Nettison's eyelids drooped so that he viewed Tarkman's most unusual puzzlement with extreme caution. Obviously Tarkman was not Oruna's district commissioner at that moment. He was just a man who, for some very human reason, had no regret for Tola's death and did not want Nettison to have any either.

Nettison thought it best to humor him. The story would come quicker that way if it came at all.

"I'm not sorry Tola is dead," he said after

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a moment's thoughtful pause. "Not because *he* happened to play the fool. But that any man should die like that—so stupidly—so unnecessarily—"

"Unnecessarily!"

The look in Tarkman's eyes was most convincing. According to that look Tola's death was the most necessary thing in the world—to Tarkman. And, of course, this was more than merely odd. It was altogether incredible. In fact, Nettison had a very difficult time of it trying to conceal just how incredible he thought it was. However, he managed to make his voice drawl indifferently as he endeavored to explain.

"Well, it's hardly necessary for any man to die like that, just because my boot landed on him. You see, I might have kicked any one of the hundred others and nothing would have happened. But he chanced to be the one my boot picked out and—well, he just isn't any more. Life sure is a chancy experiment."

"Yes — ah — er — yes, yes, of course," Tarkman agreed, then lighted another cigaret, laughed, slapped Nettison's knee and suddenly rose. "You're a great chap, Nettison. All sorts of ideas—what? 'He just isn't'—'just isn't!' You Americans have such a deucedly apt way of putting things. 'Just isn't!' Clever, —— clever—" swinging abruptly toward the companion— "let's go out on deck. Dashed hot in here."

Nettison followed leisurely, eyeing the man ahead with a quiet, speculative interest.

In his wanderings up and down the Nigerias, from the pink walls of Kano, to the black, mangrove-bound creeks of the Delta, Nettison had encountered many things that were strange and often inexplicable. And Tarkman's case was strange enough because Tarkman was the last man in the world to whom anything unofficial would be likely to happen.

Yet Nettison's eyes, as they followed Tarkman to the rail, presently held a light that was akin to skepticism or disappointment or a combination of both.

For Nettison had learned from experience that the explanation for the greatest disturbances was not only always of the simplest sort, but also, for the greater part, cheek by jowl with some raw and naked fundamental of life that any fool with half an eye to the future could have seen and avoided.

So he was afraid, as he watched Tarkman toss another cigaret end into Oruna Creek, that the D. C. was not going to startle him much more than he had already done. Big men, of the heavily silent, judicial sort had a disappointing trick of emulating the mountain that brought forth a mouse.

And this reflection, dressed up in varied phraseology, was perhaps Niger Nettison's most mournful commentary on life. He was still living in the hope that some day something somewhere would live up to his expectations. And nothing ever had.

The first elephant he had seen at a circus at Raleigh had not been as big as he expected an elephant to be; the sky-scrapers of New York had not developed any cricks in his neck; the stokehold of the steamer that had carried him to Liverpool had been neither as hot nor as hard upon his back as he had anticipated a stokehold would be; and every Englishman did not say " 'at" or "humbrella."

THESE were among his earliest disappointments. But he was still having them. In short, to Nettison life was something of an incessant anti-climax; a fire-cracker that sputtered a bit in spots but never really went off. And Tarkman's case would, in all likelihood, be another of the same.

Even the killing of Tola—what was it? A moment of life crowded chockful with passion and steel and blood and flame and lead and death. Was this melodrama? the kind of thing that yanked you to the edge of your chair and made you sit up straight for once in your life at least?

Perhaps it was. But Nettison had had no time or opportunity to appreciate it. It had happened too suddenly—like swallowing fine wine at a gulp. And if a man tried to sip wine of that sort slowly—

"Er—Nettison."

Tarkman had turned his head, and the sound of his voice brought Nettison out of his disgruntled, semi-trance-like humor with a jerk.

"Yes?"

The D. C. came completely about and leaned the small of his back against the rail. Plainly, he had managed to get a better grip on himself and the question he asked, he asked quietly enough.

"Why were you staring at me like that?"

Nettison smiled.

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"Was I staring?"

"Straight through me."

"Then I must be cross-eyed. I was watching that oil canoe over there. That's one of Masai's, isn't it?"

The oil canoe in question, trailed by another of eight paddles with a mat awning, was not one of Chief Masai's canoes, and Nettison knew it. But Tarkman did not even turn his head to see.

"You're not cross-eyed, Nettison, and you're not a fool. Neither am I. Er—that is—not when I give myself half a chance to take a—well, let's call it a long breath."

He smiled, and eyed Nettison with what was supposed to be an assumption of quiet amusement, but which, as a matter of fact, had so much of really pathetic appeal in it that Nettison began to feel like an elder brother.

"All right," he conceded quietly. "And having taken the long breath—what comes after that?"

Tarkman glanced down river in the general direction of the A. P. A. beach, then up toward the fast nearing Government wharf, on which, if Nettison's eyes were as good as he thought they were, there stood a woman who was dressed in white and who wore a panama hat with some kind of multicolored trimming wound around it.

"After the long breath," Tarkman said slowly and a little thickly, speaking more to the wharf than to Nettison, "we shut up. *Savez?*"

"Certainly."

Tarkman paused. Nettison's ready acquiescence evidently startled him not a little, and his eyes wavered and drifted away. But they came back again and, with an effort, met Nettison's quite steadily.

"Thank you."

The voice was so low that it almost whispered, but there was no mistaking the sincerity that was behind it.

Nettison nodded and turned casually toward the opposite rail just as the launch slipped alongside the Government wharf.

IV

"GOOD afternoon, Mrs. Armsley. The doctor hasn't come back from Noala yet, has he?"

"No, Mr. Nettison, not yet. What on earth have you done to your arm?"

Nettison did not say. The woman on the wharf was the wife of the medical officer at Oruna. At first glance, and particularly when one heard her speak in the soft, melting voice of a little girl, she did not strike one as being the kind of woman that would accompany her husband into the fever-haunted jungle fastnesses of the Dark Continent. Later, however, and perhaps not much later, one was likely to change one's mind.

She was slim, black-eyed and bronze-red of hair, her complexion, despite the generous assistance of cosmetics, was of a rather heavy, sallow hue suggestive of the Orient or of a lengthy and possibly passionate acquaintance with the tropics.

Because she was a woman, Nettison was, of course, always polite and respectful. But he was afraid he did not like her. She reminded him too much of Mrs. Lakin. And Mrs. Lakin, of Degama and Segwanga and elsewhere, was the woman who, aside from being another story, had succeeded in dividing the ladies into two classes as far as Nettison was concerned; those who reminded him of Mrs. Lakin and those who, because they did not in the least remind him of her, were either uninteresting or harmless or both.

Mrs. Armsley was not harmless. Though, from Nettison's point of view, she had but little of Mrs. Lakin's wit and, if he guessed aright, still less of Mrs. Lakin's appalling gift for keeping herself out of trouble, he had no doubt whatever about her power to make her presence known and felt wherever she happened to invade the haunts of men.

"It's nothing, Mrs. Armsley—" the voice was Tarkman's, somewhat short and impatient—"nothing at all. A little trouble on the A. P. A. beach of no consequence to any one except poor Nettison."

And Tarkman laughed in a hollow fashion while Mrs. Armsley, drawing away from the edge of the wharf a few steps, looked suspicious and puzzled and by no means certain of what she ought to do or say next.

"Oh," flatly, "I see."

Then she smiled sympathetically upon Nettison who, followed immediately by Tarkman, climbed up on to the wharf beside her.

"I thought perhaps Mr. Nettison had been trying to live up to his reputation."

"What is my reputation, Mrs. Armsley?" Nettison asked simply, before Tarkman could think of anything to say.

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"That you kill people quite a lot. Has he killed any one this time, Mr. Tarkman?"

Plainly she did not expect that Nettison had killed any one, and Tarkman's unintelligible grunt was not illuminating. Also, as the D. C. moved up the wharf, he did not accommodate his pace to that of the lady's. With a nod that was probably supposed to be apologetic for his haste, he strode rapidly and heavily toward his office in the residency and allowed Nettison to please himself about the matter.

Mrs. Armsley's thumb and forefinger, gently gripping his sleeve, made Nettison pause, and the clanking arrival of a chain gang that was unloading a low draft freighter aided Mrs. Armsley's intention to delay him.

"What's wrong?" she asked in a low voice, glancing significantly in Tarkman's direction. "What happened?"

Nettison smiled.

"I guess that's official business."

"Even your arm?"

"No. My arm's my own."

"Then tell me about it."

Her quick and very much alive black eyes darted after Tarkman as she said this, then, seeming to measure the distance between them and the chain gang, she added in a tone that was full of consideration for Nettison:

"Let's walk up to Dr. Armsley's office and wait for him there. I don't like those terrible creatures staring at me the way they're doing."

The members of the chain gang were doing a lot of staring in their sullen, owl-like way, and their dry, gray-as-dust, near naked bodies were not a pretty picture for a lady to look upon.

So Nettison answered the slight tug upon his shirt sleeve and moved up the wharf. He had to get off the wharf in any case, so he did not commit himself in any way; and he was glad Mrs. Armsley, apparently assured of his intention to wait for the doctor in the latter's office, was content to stifle her curiosity for the time being and allow the conversation to confine itself to generalities.

They had to pass the residency on the way up the beach, and Nettison, who was paying little or no heed to the attention he was attracting from both white and black, made it his business to halt in the main doorway of Tarkman's office to be quite sure of the D. C.'s immediate intentions regarding him.

But Tarkman was not there. To Nettison's mild astonishment, the colored clerk to whom he addressed the inquiry, informed him that the D. C. had gone up to his room in the living quarters overhead and had left word for Nettison to report at the hospital and wait for Dr. Armsley there.

"You see how well I understand the mysterious ways of officialdom," Mrs. Armsley said, with an odd, slow smile that, somehow or other, gave to her eyes a narrow, slant-like look that had made more heads than Armsley's swim. "I knew your next step was my husband's office. It had to be, unless—is your arm very badly hurt, Mr. Nettison?"

"Oh, not so badly."

Nettison touched his sun-helmet, as he nodded to a Public Works Department engineer, and straightway avoided the engineer's curiosity by heading up the palm-lined path that led directly past the hospital.

"But it'll need a few stitches, I guess."

"Oh, I'm sorry," softly. "And you are so tremendously active, too. I'm sure you are going to hate having to stay still long enough to give it a chance to heal."

"It isn't bad enough for that."

"No?"

Mrs. Armsley laughed and Nettison did not detect the note of regret.

"But it would have to be terribly bad to make you think of staying still anywhere. Even at Oruna where you seem to have so many friends?"

Nettison noted the mark of interrogation but he said simply and sincerely:

"Oruna *is* mighty kind."

"Kinder than Segwanga?"

"Se—"

NETTISON stopped there just as if Mrs. Armsley had walloped him with her small hand flush across the mouth. And, though his feet kept moving, his mind stood stock still, while a faint hint of color showed under his eyes.

Then he discovered that Mrs. Armsley was not laughing at him. Her large, wide dark eyes were just mildly inquiring if Oruna had not been kinder than Segwanga, quite as if, to Nettison at least, Segwanga and Mrs. Lakin were not synonymous. Nevertheless, a lurking suspicion impelled

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him to ask with a belated assumption of indifference—

"Why Segwanga?"

"Wasn't it Segwanga?"

Again Mrs. Armsley smiled the odd, slow smile that gave to her eyes the narrow, slant-like look.

"I'm sure it was. Mrs. Lakin said it was."

Nettison's glance shifted quickly and purposely became absorbed in watching a naked infant, some distance ahead, crawling across the path on its stomach.

"Isn't it funny looking?" Mrs. Armsley drawled presently, and continued, without a pause, in her simplest, little girl voice:

"I met Mrs. Lakin on the Nakasa going home at the end of Dr. Armsley's last tour, and she told me how terribly popular you were at Segwanga. Wonderful woman, Mrs. Lakin, isn't she?"

The infant ahead had crawled out of sight behind a wine palm and Nettison, being left with no valid excuse for ignoring his companion, gathered his courage together with a mighty effort and said simply and steadily—

"Yes, Mrs. Lakin is all of that."

"And she thinks you are a very wonderful man."

"Hunh. That's fine."

"But when she said you hadn't a selfish or conceited bone in your body, I told her she was surely eulogizing a god, because every man is either selfish or conceited or both."

Nettison nodded slowly and solemnly and took his time about it.

"I guess you're right."

"Still if Mrs. Lakin had so much to say in your favor, you must be almost as remarkable as your reputation."

"Whatever that is," dryly.

"It's almost unbelievable, you know. Even Mrs. Lakin thought it was a bit exaggerated."

"You bet," simply. "But it's great advertising—the best kind of advertising there is."

"What is?"

"Chatter."

"Oh," flatly. "Then you don't really go about finding people who need killing, and buying and selling towns and kings and parrots and curios and ivory and things like that?"

Nettison did not smile. But he waited for two colored, white-flanneled Government clerks to pass.

"Not nowadays. This country is importing too many trousers."

"Becoming too civilized?"

"Much. Some years ago I used to be able to hire myself out as an army—infantry, cavalry, everything—march around a town like Joshua seven times and tell 'em to save the women and children first. In those days a man had a chance to be real bloodthirsty, with some hope of getting a drink—"

"Ugh! That's awful. But I know you're just romancing to—"

"But now you have to work mighty hard to get away from the sound of a sewing machine or the sight of two flat black feet sticking out of a uniform."

Mrs. Armsley laughed softly and sympathetically.

"Yes, I suppose so," she agreed, and paused and became quite serious. "And yet," with a wistful smile that had proved very effective upon sundry other subjects, "I am still the only white woman in Oruna."

Nettison observed the smile and the lonely look that accompanied it, but as they turned up the side path to the hospital and the doctor's office, all he said was:

"That's right, too. Must still look pretty woolly to you."

"Quite," Mrs. Armsley said briefly.

And she had nothing more to say until Nettison was somewhat awkwardly pulling open the screen door of the doctor's office with his left hand. Then, Mrs. Armsley, whose mouth showed the white of disappointment in the corners, tried again. Her smile was sweet and very encouraging.

"One's good right arm is a necessity, isn't it?"

"You bet," simply and as a matter of course.

And the smile faded abruptly, leaving a rather more pallid trail in its wake. The shining black eyes dulled and narrowed and Nettison thought, revealed a curious yellow glow in the depths of them. Then as with a quick lithe twist of her body, she slipped into her husband's office and straightway crossed the room toward his desk. Nettison had a sharply distinct impression of a kind of animal fury and stealth—something like that of one of the larger cats.

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V

DR. ARMSLEY'S colored clerk was not in the office when Nettison closed the screen door behind him. For a moment or two Mrs. Armsley stood beside her husband's desk, with her back toward Nettison, and made a pretense of being interested in the profusion of papers that were strewn all over the desk with the characteristic abandon for which Oruna's M. O. was particularly noted.

Then, as she turned leisurely about, the clerk, resplendent in his white uniform, came fussily in from the small ward in the rear.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Armsley. The doctah—"

A languid wave of the hand dismissed him. Mrs. Armsley scarcely even glanced in his direction.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Nettison?" she suggested, indicating a chair, and set the example by seating herself in the doctor's chair beside the desk.

Nettison sat down. He had a feeling that their conversation on the way up to the hospital had simply been a preliminary, and the manner in which the doctor's clerk had been disposed of indicated that Mrs. Armsley, in spite of her little girl voice and manner, had a decided trick of making herself understood and of commanding obedience with the least possible effort and the fewest number of words.

"Now," she began simply and comfortably, "tell me about the arm. What was it? A knife?"

Nettison laughed. Apparently she hoped it had been. There was an eagerness in her voice that hinted at something almost akin to affection for anything with a cutting edge.

"It was a knife, all right," Nettison assured her, and saw the light in her eyes leap in altogether involuntary anticipation.

"Whose knife?"

"Tola's," simply. "He's the son—"

"Tola!"

The name was hardly a whisper; thick and unnatural, striking an odd, far-off chord of memory in Nettison's ears. And the short, equally thick and unnatural laugh that followed it struck even more sharply upon the same chord. Then came a pause that was heavy and strained and, to Nettison at least, both unnecessary and unreal.

"You—you—why surely you're joking? Not Masai's son!"

Nettison nodded slowly, and his expression was that of one who was listening more intently than seemed altogether necessary. Mrs. Armsley's stare widened.

"Wh—what for? Why did he do a thing like that to you?"

Nettison's brows furrowed slightly. The vibrations upon the chord of memory were slipping off into distance as Mrs. Armsley's little girl voice came back to her just as suddenly as it had gone away.

"He must have been drinking, I guess," he said briefly.

"Oh," dully, "I see. That awful trade gin, I suppose."

Nettison did not confirm or deny this. The tinkle of a spoon stirring something in a glass somewhere beyond the open laboratory door sounded quite distinctly in the pause that followed, and when it stopped—just as if she had been waiting for it to stop—Mrs. Armsley leaned toward him and asked in a deliberate voice that was as foreign to her as a lisp would have been to Nettison.

"And what did you do?"

Nettison studied the woman's face, which appeared more sallow than usual just then, and he wondered with an odd sense of curiosity what would be the result if he told her what he had done. And he hesitated so long she leaned forward a little farther and repeated—

"What did you do?"

Nettison glanced down at the native-made mat at his feet, then out through the screen door at the blurred figure of a passing trader's clerk, and finally and sharply back to Mrs. Armsley.

"He's dead."

"Dead! You killed him!"

"I'm afraid I did."

And Mrs. Armsley's face suddenly became as devoid of expression as that of any doll; more so, in fact, because a doll's eyes and cheeks have a semblance of life and color, while Mrs. Armsley's had none. She did not stare now and though her lips were slightly parted, she did not give any impression of gaping.

A leisurely step sounded lightly outside the screen door and she turned her eyse mechanically in its direction.

"This is the doctor now," she said tonelessly and as Dr. Armsley pulled open the screen door, she rose and smiled.

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Coming in out of the bright sunshine, Frank Armsley did not see that smile as Nettison saw it; a mere flashing of small, white teeth that seemed to be as lifeless as her eyes.

"I've brought you a patient, Frank," she announced and, quite visibly to Nettison, tried to shake herself out of the mental paralysis that gripped her. "Mr. Nettison has been—"

"Yes," the doctor interrupted quietly, but just a trifle too perfunctorily for comfort. "Tarkman told me. Hello, Nettison. Rotten luck, wasn't it?"

Nettison, who had risen to his feet when Mrs. Armsley did, grinned and shrugged his shoulders. And Mrs. Armsley said with an assumption of horror:

"I think it's awful! That terrible trade gin is respon—"

"Better not wait," her husband interrupted again in that same quiet, but slightly too perfunctory voice.

"All right. I'll run along. Dinner—"

"I'll probably be a little late."

"You always are," with a nervous laugh. "Good-by, Mr. Nettison."

"Good-by, Mrs. Armsley."

She closed the screen door softly and carefully as she went out.

DR. ARMSLEY turned to his desk and fumbled among the papers there until he had unearthed a tin of cigarets which he did not appear to be in a hurry to find.

He was a man in the late thirties, tall and lean and careless, but always scrupulously shaven and notoriously addicted to rubber-soled shoes, gray flannels and green drinks. Nevertheless, the most remarkable thing about him was the woman he had married, and no one ever thought of Frank Armsley without thinking of his wife.

Presently he turned and mechanically held the cigaret tin out to Nettison who shook his head.

"No, thanks."

And just as mechanically Armsley put the tin back on the desk.

"A little drink, perhaps?" he suggested with a friendly smile. "You look a bit washed out."

"That's a better suggestion," Nettison said. "And I guess after a trip to Noala—"

"Noala is a tiresome trip," Armsley agreed. "Just a minute."

Then, as he went out after bottles and glasses—

"Brandy or Scotch?"

"Brandy and soda, if you have it."

In a little while, neither of them having had anything to say in the interval save the customary "chin, chin," Nettison was enjoying his brandy and soda after his own fashion—which was an extremely modest and moderate fashion; and Armsley was seated at his desk meditatively sipping a *creme de menthe* concoction of his own from a lean, slender-stemmed glass held most delicately in his large and bony right hand.

He seemed to be in no hurry to undertake the task of stitching Nettison's arm, and for several minutes preserved a silence which, without any explanations or apologies, he appeared to assume Nettison would understand. Then, speculatively eyeing the green liquid in the glass, he said absently—

"Masai is going to raise —— about this."

"Something like that."

"He'll try to square things with you if he can."

"I guess so."

"And with one arm in a sling—" the doctor turned toward Nettison now— "Better stick close to the Government for a while, hadn't you?"

Nettison laughed, although his sensations just then were far from laughter. The doctor's anxiety on his behalf was almost as startling as Tarkman's grin and Mrs. Armsley's only too obvious interest in the late Tola.

"Perhaps you're right," he agreed without any intention of acting on the doctor's suggestion. "Is that Tarkman's notion or just—"

"No. Tarkman is—" the doctor paused and took a long sip of the green drink. "Do you happen to know anything about neurasthenia, Nettison?"

"Not much."

"Um—well—neither does any one else. But it's bad stuff and a lot of us out here have got it, more or less. And worrying about things little or big, doesn't help the patient very much."

"No, I guess not."

"So you'd better hang around Oruna for a while and give Tarkman that much less to worry about."

Nettison's brows drew down and he regarded Armsley for some little time in speculative silence.

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"Hunh. What's the matter with him? He doesn't have to lose any sleep on my account."

"Of course not. But he will. Obsessions, Nettison, are quite remarkable things in their way, and you can't kill them just by hitting them over the head with a mallet. In fact, that kind of treatment seems to encourage them to grow."

Nettison smiled and nodded, and then asked seriously—

"And it's your idea that Tarkman has suddenly become obsessed with some kind of notion that if I leave Oruna—"

"He'll have you on his conscience for the remainder of his life. And perhaps the remainder of his life would not be very long in a case of that kind."

"But he looks as strong as an ox!"

"Most of them do," dryly. "The pallid cheek and sunken eye have no part in this kind of performance."

A short pause; then rising and putting down his empty glass—

"Well, let's have a look at the arm."

Nettison also rose, but there was still a puzzled query in his eyes, and as the doctor took possession of his arm, Nettison asked pointedly—

"If he's that sick, why don't you invalid him home?"

"Wouldn't do any good. It isn't a question of climate."

And this, in Armsley's mind at least, seemed to be all that was necessary to say about it.

VI

IN THE succeeding half hour or so, Nettison had the opportunity to ask himself how Armsley had managed to find out so much about Tarkman's new-born obsession and come to such definite conclusions about it in the short time since he, Armsley, had returned from Noala.

This line of thought naturally suggested that the doctor had had the D. C. under observation for some time, and that the Tola incident had simply brought to light a culminating phase in which Nettison's well-being had become of first importance in Tarkman's eyes.

As Nettison had already suspected, the reason for this was gratitude; gratitude for the killing of Tola. It was the kind of gratitude, too, which Tarkman, obviously, could not very well put into words. And to a man with screeching nerves, restraint of any kind and particularly of speech, only intensified the desire for expression.

In short, Tarkman was something like a boiler without a safety valve. And unless Nettison or Armsley or just a twist of circumstance, whatever it might be, managed to take up the role of the missing valve, Oruna's D. C. was likely to blow up in almost any direction.

Chief Masai could be counted upon to make Tarkman's situation as uncomfortable, officially, as he possibly could; and Masai's ability to scatter trouble in his ponderous wake was not to be sneered at, particularly by a district commissioner whose business in life it was to preserve the peace within his district.

And since the shooting of Tola had taken place on the A. P. A. beach, against which Masai already nursed a private grudge, the chances of inducing the chief to adopt a reasonable attitude assumed a gauzy thinness that made the avoidance of further bloodshed as nearly impossible as snow on the banks of Oruna creek.

Just what connection Mrs. Armsley had with the affair, it was extremely difficult even to conjecture. And the Doctor, as far as Nettison could determine, was simply an onlooker with a professional interest in the outcome. Certainly he did not betray to Nettison the faintest sign of anxiety that might have suggested that he was in any way personally involved.

And presently, when Nettison's arm, duly stitched and bandaged, was resting in its sling again, the doctor said briefly—

"Tarkman wanted you to report to him when you got through here."

Nettison glanced at the clock on the wall above Armsley's desk.

"His office will be closed, won't it?"

"Very likely. But any of the residency stewards will take you up to his rooms."

"All right—," moving toward the screen door. "Sorry if I've made you work overtime. Going to shut up shop now, aren't you?"

And Armsley's head snapped back a little as if something had stung him.

"Not yet," shortly and with a decided hint of impatience which, to Nettison, was sharply illuminating.

"Then I'll be getting along. Thanks for fixing me up."

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Armsley grunted something unintelligible and hurriedly picked up an official looking document from the scattered jumble on his desk.

So Nettison, with the shadow of a smile in his quiet gray eyes, left him there, more or less satisfied in his own mind, that Oruna's M. O. did not at any time particularly welcome the suggestion that the hour had arrived when he should, like any other husband, go home to his wife.

ORIGINALLY Nettison had been a clerk in a trading factory at Siluko. This was in the Benin River district, reminiscent of the uprising of Nana and of the gory orgies of the city of Benin—the place of a thousand hells.

And it was in the doorway of a Siluko kernel store that Nettison bought the small ebony "head of a woman" which he had later sold to an army officer at a profit of several thousand per cent., and which now formed an important part of the Benin City exhibit in the British Museum.

This was Nettison's real beginning. But as things of the sort did not come to the doors of kernel stores more than once in a decade, the interval was much too long for Nettison to stand and wait.

So he had walked away from the Siluko kernel store doorway in the general direction of the nearest creek and a canoe, and had gone in search of things that were worth putting into glass cases, or holding captive in cages, or, as had frequently happened, served to augment the imperishable records which other men wrote into books.

Thus, in his own way, almost everywhere between Lake Tchad and the sea, Niger Nettison had made history of a kind. Some of it was good history that remained good and improved with time; some of it was not so permanent and much of it had been just the hurried lifting of a veil that had, even more hurriedly, to be dropped again.

But whatever sort of history he had written and however much the name of Niger Nettison had grown and prospered, he still found it necessary to remember when his credit was good and for how much.

For, to Nettison, although his appreciation of a good bargain was just as keen as that of the average, the pot of gold at the rainbow's end had no allure whatever. Money, marriage and the millennium were three things in which he had no personal interest.

He planned little and he promised less. And of all the things he had found and frequently fought to keep, perhaps the greatest and most profitable of his discoveries was the simple, hackneyed truth that life was essentially the same no matter where one found it; just a morning and an evening and a drowsing to sleep.

However, he did not moralize and he did not judge; not audibly. But, having learned to strip civilization of most of its disguise, he had acquired the somewhat unhappy trick of reducing his contemplation of men—and some few women—to an unhurried and unprejudiced consideration of the lowly naked dust of their beginnings.

All too frequently he had found that this denuding process did not leave very much to consider; but as he once more passed along the palm-shaded concrete strip toward the Oruna residency, he tried to apply the simplification test to Tarkman.

Stripping him of his normally silent and heavily judicial personality and reducing him to the simple level of an unadorned human being who, in the course of each twenty-four hours, thought and did unadorned human things, Nettison clothed Tarkman in a figurative loin-cloth and then stood back a mental pace or two and watched him perform.

The result, within the space of a few hundred yards, was at once disappointing and amazing.

Tarkman, in spite of his heavy jowl and large white teeth, did not like the loin-cloth. Just as clearly as though the D. C. were walking along the path ahead of him, Nettison saw Tarkman's heavy body cringe and shrink with a modest sensitiveness that would have done justice to the purest of pure women.

More than this—and Nettison's mental pictures had rarely proven themselves altogether misleading—Tarkman had no vanity in his physical attributes. He wanted his clothes; this and nothing more.

So Nettison gave them back to him; and at once, with something of a shudder of relief, Tarkman stood upright again, perfectly respectable. Obviously, too, he was as keen to retain his own ingrained concept of respectability as though he had been the spinster teacher of a Sunday school!

Nettison smiled at this, and, remembering

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Tarkman's ghoulish grin, tried to brush the respectability theory aside, and to invest the D. C. with a primitive personality that better fitted the grin. But it was no use. Tarkman insisted upon remaining respectable at all costs. Even at the cost of killing Tola himself, if this had still been necessary.

Consequently, for another hundred yards or so, Nettison's eyes narrowed in concentration upon one word and tried to make the most of it.

Respectability.

It was not a word that had any particular kinship with the Niger Delta, where life, even in its most respectable moments, was always closely allied with the raw and naked truth. And, of course, respectability was never naked. It was the concomitant of clothes and screens and carefully drawn window shades; and with the possible exception of the Armsley bungalow, there was not a window shade in Oruna.

Of course, a sense of duty and honor and decency was just as necessary in the Delta swamps as anywhere else—more so in fact if a man wanted to live as long as the climate would let him; but that the district commissioner, and particularly an old hand like Tarkman, should find himself in a position where his notions of respectability made the death of the son of Masai an absolute necessity—this, to Nettison, would have been utterly absurd if he had not known that absurdity was only too frequently the mask of tragedy.

Every now and then, on his way down from the hospital, his eyes had traveled to the waterfront and out upon the river in search of Masai's forty-paddle canoe which would be sure to make its appearance sooner or later. But as yet there was no sign of it. So he hoped, as the swiftly descending tropical darkness was even then closing down upon Oruna, that Masai would decide to devote the night to mourning, and postpone his visit to the Government beach until the following day.

A Kroo-boy steward showed him up to Tarkman's rooms which faced the river and opened out upon a semi-private veranda which Tarkman shared with a representative of the treasury department who was temporarily attached to the staff at Oruna. This man's name was Frawling; and just then he was absent on a mission of investigation at Daraka where an A. D. C.—assistant district commissioner—had permitted himself to be deprived of his keys and a considerable sum of the Government's money.

Consequently, Tarkman had the veranda all to himself, and it was there Nettison found him, slouched in a large Madeira chair, out of which he creakingly climbed as soon as Nettison made his appearance.

"What the deuce—Gulba! Which man tell you bring Mas' Nettison foh dis place?" he demanded of the Kroo-boy testily, and his glance shot out toward the river in a decidedly nervous fashion.

"No man, sah," Gulba answered respectfully, backing away a careful step or two. "Mas' Nettison—"

"I asked him to show me the way to your rooms," Nettison explained. "And he did. Want to go inside?"

"Yes—er—we can have a drink in there—"

"No, thanks. That is, not for me. Armsley just let me sample something out of his bottle. But we'll go inside any way. It will look more official."

"Yes — exactly — quite so," Tarkman agreed, and they passed into the sitting-room. "Armsley told you, of course—Gulba, bring lamp one time."

"Yessah."

The boy departed and Nettison sat down in the chair which Tarkman indicated; a chair which was on the far side of Tarkman's writing table and safely removed from any possibility of being seen from the river. Tarkman himself chose a chair under the lamp stand, which, for a few minutes, was minus the lamp; and in those few minutes, in the rapidly gathering dark, none of the objects in the room were very clear to Nettison.

But he knew there was a photograph frame on the table within reach of his hand, and because the absence of light prevented him from immediately discovering what sort of photograph the frame contained—mother, father, wife, fiancee or some one with similar claims to honor in Tarkman's scheme of things—Nettison became unusually curious about the matter.

"Armsley told you I thought you'd better stop in Oruna for a while?" Tarkman asked with an assumption of bruskness that did not sound convincing to Nettison. "A one-armed man, you know—"

"Yes. He told me."

"And where will you stop?"

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"I haven't decided yet."

Tarkman cleared his throat. "I don't want to insist upon you tying yourself down to the Government beach—"

"No. Armsley just said Oruna."

"Delton's perhaps?"

"Hardly. I guess I've gotten poor Delton into trouble enough as it is."

"But you don't think Delton would object—"

"Not for a minute. But I don't like to rub it in."

"Then where—"

"I haven't decided yet."

Tarkman grunted, and his house-boy coming in with the lamp at this juncture, put a period upon the discussion for the moment.

Nettison had suddenly lost interest in it in any case.

The picture in the photograph frame was that of an elderly minister of the church.

VII

THE house-boy scuffed his way out again, but for a minute or two Tarkman did not seem particularly anxious to resume the conversation, and Nettison did not offer him any encouragement.

A casual glance of investigation about the room added nothing to the photograph on the table, and did not take anything away. With the exception of a deer-skin shield which Nettison himself had brought down from the Kagoro country about six months before, Tarkman's visible possessions were of the usual sort; some wicker furniture, a few native mats on the floor and walls, an inconsequent print or two, the inevitable water cooler, and the usual quota of apparently somnolent house lizards that fell to the lot of every man and helped him keep his quarters moderately free of moths and flies.

So that Nettison's eyes came back to the photograph with the conviction that it linked Tarkman up with the word respectability with a decisiveness that left but little room for argument; particularly since the clergyman was a white-bearded, gentle looking soul who had the appearance of having gazed rather apprehensively out upon life from the shelter of the vicarage of a droning country town.

"That's my father."

The information was shot at Nettison with rather startling abruptness.

"Yes?"

Nettison picked up the photograph to do it the justice of a closer examination.

"Fine looking old gentleman and still mighty active, I'd say."

"Yes. Quite."

There was not much encouragement in this, and as Nettison continued to honor the photograph with a still closer look, the D. C. fidgetted in his chair and resorted to a cigaret after the manner of a man who does not want to smoke so much as he wants to give his hands and mouth something to do.

"Ever have any trouble with Tola before this?" he asked suddenly.

Nettison put the photograph down carefully.

"No. But I've always had a hunch that his schooling was going to make a heap of trouble for him some day. And I guess it has."

Tarkman dropped his cigaret. And he did it in such a sudden, nerveless fashion that Nettison, who was watching the man's every slightest move, did not think it was an accident.

"What do you mean by that?" the D. C. asked, picking up the cigaret and talking to the floor. "His schooling? Has he had any?"

"Some. Used to go down to the Government school at Warri. And I guess he learned enough book down there to give him a big head. These fellows think their education is complete when they can write for samples of the things advertised in the magazines."

"Magazines."

Tarkman repeated the word mechanically and without a question mark.

"Borrowed or stolen, I suppose from a white man. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

Nettison nodded. He knew Tarkman was pleading ignorance on a subject on which he was probably better informed than Nettison himself, and the necessity for it was not at all clear. So Nettison carried it along a little further.

"Your Sierra Leone clerks, who have had a kind of high school education, have conceits of the sort that run to words of at least five syllables and to Latin and Greek quotations. But they're just funny. They're

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so busy being impressive they haven't got time to be mean."

"No. Quite true," nervously. "Windbags mostly. But what have they got to do—"

"They don't become troublesome until they know enough to shut up or at least get down to words of one syllable."

"Yes. I've known a few like that. We have to keep weeding them out. But Tola isn't—"

"He was at the other and most poisonous end of the line," Nettison interrupted quietly. "The kindergarten class; the kind of native who has learned just enough to spell out words and write down what he thinks he wants to say, without having it make a whole lot of sense to any one else. And that kind of native is about as welcome to me as a black water snake curled up on the palm of my hand."

"Yes—yes—of course. Very dangerous. And Tola—you think he was like that, eh?"

"I guess he must have been. The average native doesn't fool around white men with knives. Not on the trading beaches."

"No. Not many of them. Quite right there, Nettison. Quite right."

Tarkman laughed, and the sound was as hollow as an empty rain barrel in the dry season. "A real case of a little knowledge being a dangerous thing. Won't you have a drink?"

"No, thanks," simply.

"But you'll stay for dinner. Too late to get back to Delton's in time now."

And as Nettison hesitated, Tarkman added hastily:

"Nothing formal, you know. We can have it served up here. Armsley and his wife are coming over later for some music or cards—something of the sort. And if you'd like to borrow some fresh duds, I fancy we could dig up some things that'd fit. Boy!"

Tarkman's sudden call for his house-boy had a rasping crack in it, and when he rose and strode toward Nettison, there was a jumpy, apologetic anxiety in his step and manner that made Nettison wonder whether he ought to be sorry or suspicious or both.

"You know, you've done some confounded good work for us from time to time," Tarkman began in a voice that was pitched too high. "Some —— good work, old man, and some of us, I'm afraid, haven't quite appreciated it. Not at its full worth, I mean. But I'd like you to feel whenever you're down this way—" Tarkman's nervous right hand reached out to Nettison's shoulder, barely touched it with the tips of his fingers and drew away again—"I'd like you to feel that I—that I—"

"That's all right," quietly.

"Yes," dully, though Tarkman's shoulders lifted as he tried to get a firmer grip upon himself. "I suppose it is. Everything's all right. Quite all right."

His house-boy entered and Tarkman's head turned in his direction, as the boy asked respectfully:

"You call me, sah?"

Tarkman seemed to be wondering whether he had or not, so Nettison interjected:

"Bath water for me. And some propah clothes foh chop. D. C. say him and me, we go chop dis place. *Savez?*"

The boy looked startled, and naturally glanced toward Tarkman for confirmation of the somewhat unusual order.

"Go ahead. Be all right. What the —— are you staring at?"

The boy stopped staring and, with another frightened look in Nettison's direction, went quickly out. Tarkman laughed shortly.

"Anything the least out of the way and their eyes pop out like headlights. Had much luck lately?"

The question came with that rifle-shot kind of suddenness to which Nettison was becoming accustomed. And as the D. C. went back to his chair he seemed to have forgotten all about his intention to assure Nettison of the right kind of appreciation whenever he came down to Oruna.

"Just got through having a good time in the Brass country," Nettison admitted freely enough. "Found an odd bit of carving in ivory—something of a cross between a vulture and an owl—around Kelani."

"Hunh. Any trouble getting it?"

"Not much."

"Where's the ivory piece?"

"Randall bought it. I can always stick Randall with anything in ivory. You know him, don't you?"

Tarkman nodded without enthusiasm. Every one knew Randall. In his spare moments he was the attorney general of the Central Province; but the bulk of his time was generally believed to be devoted to paying for the things which Nettison or any one else thought he would like to buy.

"Then you don't need any money?"

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Nettison laughed.

"Not this trip."

Tarkman looked disappointed. He made a growling noise in his throat which presently resolved itself into words.

"I think you're lying. What were you going to see Delton about?"

"Nothing much. I just managed to pick up some special Upper Niger brass work he wanted to get hold of, and a few pieces of Hausa embroidery for his wife."

"Wife?"

Tarkman's head jerked oddly to one side.

"Delton?"

"He has a son at college."

"Delton?"

The D. C.'s tone had dulled again. The note of incredulity had but little life in it.

"Funny. You can know a man for years out here and still know nothing of the kind of man he is at home."

Nettison nodded. He had a thought along those lines himself as he glanced at the photograph on the table and then at Tarkman. Certainly no one would have suspected that Oruna's D. C. had been reared in a vicarage.

For a moment or two silence enveloped Tarkman as with a heavy cloud, and when he tossed his cigaret end into a convenient ash receiver, he did it with an absent jerk of his hand that was most expressive of his mood.

"Married? Delton? Hunh. Always a woman somewhere, isn't there?" A pause. "—— fool!"

Nettison smiled, but he was watching the sour look on the D. C.'s face and forming conclusions therefrom that were not at all humorous.

"That's kind o' rough on Delton's wife, isn't it," he asked with a widening grin. "You never met her."

Tarkman sat up straight.

"What difference does that make?"

Nettison shook his head in tolerant disagreement.

"You're sour, Tarkman. The trouble with you is that you expect a woman to act and react like a man—to think in the masculine gender and dress in the feminine. And it doesn't work out that way. Not ever."

"Eh?" blankly. "What'n—what do you know about women?"

"Nothing—except that they are women. And I expect them to do and think the kind of things a woman does—whatever they are. You'd save yourself a lot of trouble if—"

"I? I, Nettison? What makes you think I—that I—that there's any trouble with a woman—"

"I didn't mean you personally," Nettison lied easily. "I meant any man with a viewpoint on women as sour as yours."

"I see."

Tarkman continued to lean forward in his chair and look steadily at Nettison with a dull, fishy kind of stare. Then he asked rather suddenly but very simply—

"Do you owe Delton any money?"

Nettison laughed.

"Not a *bicuba*."

"And I suppose he'll pay you for the stuff you've brought him?"

"After he's haggled with me like a horse trader, he will."

Again Tarkman looked disappointed. Plainly he was anxious to do something tangible for Nettison; and Nettison's present state of affluence, however fleeting, seemed to disturb the D. C. considerably. Then he had another thought.

"Where's the launch?"

"Down river, at Kitchell's. Doada beach."

"What's the matter?"

"She needs some repairs and I didn't have time to make them."

Tarkman's eyes lighted up with an almost pathetic eagerness.

"Suppose we have her towed up here? You'll have a better chance of fixing her up than at that one-horse place of Kitchell's. Let's do that. I'll have our launch pick her up tomorrow morning,"

"Bath water, sah."

Nettison was so intent upon Tarkman's anxiety to be helpful that he scarcely heard the house-boy's monotoned announcement.

"That's mighty decent of you," he said, "and if Masai's going to cut up rough, the old *Walrus* sure would come in handy."

"Fine! We'll do that. Tomorrow morning."

"Bath water, sah," the house-boy droned in a slightly higher key.

So that Niger Nettison went off to bathe with a vision of Oruna's D. C. looking absurdly grateful for being permitted to start the mighty wheels of Government revolving in the service of a man who, in certain clearly defined and much less friendly quarters, was regarded as being little better than a tramp.

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VIII

IN THE native village of Oruna, Chief Masai held the threads of many lives wrapped around his pudgy fingers. And, in normal circumstances, the village offered him a peaceful privacy for his wallowing fat.

His description fitted that of the majority of the black and oily potentates of the Niger Delta; and among those who were leaner and drier and closer to the immortal dust of their fathers than he, there was none whose capacity for hate was any greater, or whose methods of keeping a properly balanced ledger were any more ingenious than his.

Masai was the Government's native political agent for the Oruna district. This meant much to him when he visited the Government beach in his forty-paddle canoe, clothed in a panama hat, an expansive orange blazer and eight yards of gorgeously trailing "real India" cloth.

But, squatting at ease in the village of Oruna, or hieing forth upon adventures of his own careful choosing, his official entity became as simple of removal as his hat and interfered with his conception of ethics not at all.

In short, Masai was a man of power who made the most of life after his own fashion, and succeeded where others had failed because he had a head on his shoulders.

And upon the evening when Niger Nettison was dressing for dinner in Tarkman's rooms and making his own choice of Tarkman's clothes, Masai felt the need of the head his gods had given him more acutely than at any previous time in his dark and devious history.

Tola, his first born was dead. And Tola's soul, driven out of his body by a white man's bullet, would forever hurtle shrieking through the blackest spaces of the night. For the soul of Tola who had been so careless as to strike and miss, was eternally damned by the unorthodox character of the death he had died.

The gods of the Delta did not approve of mutilation. They were jealous of the physical perfection of their dead; and the kind of mutilation which a man's own stupidity brought upon himself was most damnable in their sight.

Therefore, Nettison's bullet, by virtue of the hole it had torn in Tola's body, had put a curse upon the son of Masai; and even then, in the secrecy of a seldom-trodden section of the bush beyond the village, one of the first effects of this curse was being demonstrated without any demonstration whatever.

No feasting or dancing or wailing of women, or slaves hung by the neck for sacrifice; there was none of the usual things for Tola. Nothing more than a hastily scooped-out grave, the whispering, frightened chatter of simple fools in the dark, the scuff and stamp of naked feet shaping a lowly mound and then the quick dip and swish of paddles.

Masai could visualize this quite easily. Squatting alone upon multi-colored native mats, within the silent sanctity of his own mud and thatch dwelling, he demonstrated that, black, yellow, white or red, it was not good to picture one's first-born being buried after this manner.

It was still worse to know that one's first-born deserved it; and no one knew better than Masai just how much of a fool Tola had been, particularly since he had learned to know something of what was written in the white man's books.

There were, fortunately, no black men's books; none, at least that Masai knew anything about. Masai was glad of this. The things that white men wrote upon the clean white page stayed upon that page, and, as the chief had discovered, helped the white men to remember long after the man who had written the words was dead. And this kind of thing, among black men, would have made life, which was difficult enough as it was, utterly impossible.

In the light of a dimmed kerosene lamp, Masai's oily face glittered like polished ebony. His eyes, muffled up in fat, were just stabbing pin-points that, every now and then, disappeared altogether.

Because the occasion was both mournful and informal, he wore a piece of washed-out print cloth that covered his nakedness from the waist down. A red coral necklace, with the customary cloth-wrapped amulet in the center, completed his attire.

And when he begun to sway from side to side, and to make whining noises that were like thinned-out groans out of the huge deeps of him, the general effect he produced was far from lovely.

His house, the compound that was about it, and the village that lay in a huddling dark beyond the light of the kerosene lamp,

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were wrapped in a quiet that whimpered. For the sorrows and the shames of Masai were the sorrows and shames of his people; and the dominant thought in Masai's mind just then, was also dominant in the mind of every native in the district of Oruna.

This thought, in crystallized form, spelled out the name of Niger Nettison.

Though Tola had been a fool and his burial a thing to be despised and forgotten, Niger Nettison still lived and, of course, something would have to be done about that.

Masai already knew that Tarkman would take little or no action in the matter. The D. C.'s speech in Nettison's defence in the A. P. A. oil yard, had been faithfully reported to the chief, who, in his capacity as the Government's native political agent, unqualifiedly agreed with every word of it, just as it was fitting that the unprejudiced head of the local native judiciary should.

But within the sacred confines of his own house, clothed in the humility of a bit of faded print cloth, and visualizing the hasty, sneaking burial of his first-born son, Masai was privileged to think black if he chose, and to forget about thinking white until his forty-paddle canoe ran alongside the Government gig-wharf in the morning.

His hatred for Nettison was not a violent thing. Violence in any form, as he had warned Tola many times, was a knife with two edges; and Tola had reaped his full measure of shame simply because a little knowledge of the white man's book had closed his ears to the wisdom of his father.

It was a cold wisdom, this wisdom of Masai's. In fact, if the chief's excess poundage had been constituently on a par with the prime quality of his mind, it would have been born a startling resemblance to the chilling whiteness of frozen pork fat.

Even now, his swaying from side to side and the groans that emanated from the great bulk of him at measured intervals, were altogether mechanical, and did not interrupt in the slightest the lock-step advance of his thoughts.

And long after the village of Oruna was asleep, its chief still swayed and groaned and thought, measuring the cost of his thinking as carefully as any small-boy trader measured out a cup of rice.

He would kill Nettison, of course. This required no thought at all. But—

IX

NETTISON was glad when the Armsleys arrived, which they did coincident with the liqueurs. And, as Tarkman had made clear in advance, there was nothing formal about their entrance into the D. C.'s sitting-room, or in their manner of immediately making themselves at home.

Evidently, visiting Tarkman, and being visited by him, had become a kind of habit which, like all habits, had a tendency toward staleness now and then. Even the unusual presence of Nettison did not deprive the occasion of the unmistakable taint of monotony.

Mrs. Armsley, more radiant than ever in a tight fitting evening gown of shimmering black, elected to sit upon Nettison's left hand, while the doctor, almost immediately in possession of a Chartreuse, sprawled in a wicker chair on the opposite side of the table and at once paid homage to the rich green liquid in his liqueur glass.

His wife did not drink anything, apparently. Neither did she smoke. So that her habits seemed to be as exemplary as a medical practitioner or the son of a clergyman could wish.

But, as Nettison observed for his own private edification, if ever a woman suggested kinship with a tiger cat—a black panther for preference—Mrs. Armsley was that woman. And, judging by the slumbrous light in her eyes that was awakened now and then by little, barely perceptible flashes of fire, her humor was not far removed from the baring of her claws.

Tarkman had greeted her with a stiff kind of politeness to which she had paid practically no attention, and the D. C. seemed rather glad of this. Armsley, with characteristic carelessness, having performed the husbandly duty of escorting her there, apparently washed his hands of all responsibility for her entertainment; but, as she had evidently made up her mind in advance to concentrate upon Nettison, she paid as little heed to Armsley as he did to her. Almost her first remark to Nettison declared that she had found an excuse for being attentive to him.

"I want to take full advantage of this opportunity, Mr. Nettison, and have you teach me how to play poker."

"Poker? Doesn't the doctor or Tarkman—"

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"No, they don't. Not as you play it, I'm sure. Of course, I shall never really want to play the game myself, but it seems to have such vogue in the ships' smoking rooms and all along the coast, I'd like to know how it is really played by experts. Do you mind?"

"Not if the doctor doesn't," Nettison answered and smiled across the table at Armsley, who had disposed of his liqueur, and was able to give the matter less lackadaisical attention.

"Go ahead," he mumbled indifferently. "Perhaps you can teach Mrs. Armsley how to win back the money I've lost at that game. She's a much more finished bluffer than I am."

Of course, Nettison laughed, but he observed that Tarkman's eyes popped wide, while Mrs. Armsley, her mouth tightening for a second or two, elected to smile and say sweetly:

"Bluffing, my dear, is a woman's only armor."

"Armor?" Tarkman echoed as if he were trying to understand what the word meant. "Armor?"

Mrs. Armsley's glance remained fixed upon her husband who chose that moment to reach for a tin of cigarets to the right of Tarkman's plate.

"She means defense," he explained to the D. C. in an oddly protective tone. "A woman always defends—never attacks. Hence the necessity for armor."

"I see," slowly. "Quite so. And bluffing is a woman's only armor, eh?" Tarkman laughed a short and ugly sounding laugh. "Not half bad. I shall try to remember that—in future."

The doctor lolled back in his chair again with a cigaret drooping from the corner of his mouth. Mrs. Armsley's slumbrous look had become slightly less so, and after a pause she said in a low voice:

"No man wants the whole truth from a woman. He wants her to be what he thinks she is—half goddess, half fool. So she bluffs and tries to accommodate his point of view." Then quickly and rather sharply to Tarkman—"Let Mr. Nettison have the cards, please."

"Why, surely. Of course."

Obediently, Tarkman rose and fetched several packs of cards, and Mrs. Armsley said without enthusiasm—

"Since Mr. Nettison has only one hand, we'll have to ask you to deal."

"Certainly. Glad to."

Tarkman did not look glad. He looked desperately unhappy and, while Nettison initiated Mrs. Armsley into the mysteries of draw poker, the D. C. nervously dealt and shuffled the cards. Every now and then he dealt a card face up and finally let most of the pack in use slip out of his hands to the floor.

"Let me do it," the doctor suggested quietly and prepared to get out of his chair.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," Mrs. Armsley said tolerantly and pushed the cards in front of her toward the center of the table. "I think I know enough about poker now to know that it isn't the kind of a game I'd like to play. And the room is too smoky in any case. I'm going out to the veranda."

The doctor offered no objection and slumped back into his chair again. Tarkman, however, looking unhappier than ever, had risen to his feet, and was obviously in painful doubt about the duty of accompanying Mrs. Armsley out to the veranda.

"It is kind o' stuffy in here," Nettison broke in quietly as Mrs. Armsley rose and passed him. "I think I'll take a look at the river myself."

Tarkman sat down again quite suddenly. He reached fumblingly for the tin of cigarets, and, in removing the lid, dropped it on the table from which it rolled with a tinny clatter to the floor.

"——! Oh, ——!"

It was barely a whisper and perhaps Mrs. Armsley did not hear it. For she laughed, a low, belittling sound that, Nettison felt sure, must have lingered most unpleasantly in the room for some time after she had left it.

And when Nettison stood with her beside the veranda rail, looking out upon the murky mangrove-bound river, he had an idea that, in the shadows, Mrs. Armsley was likely to be even more unpleasant than she had been in the light, and further, following out the same thought, that she could actually see better and was less fearful in the dark than in the daytime.

"He's a clumsy animal," she said quite pleasantly. "Always has been."

Nettison did not say what he thought of this.

"Not much moon to-night, is there?" he asked after a short and heavy pause.

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But Mrs. Armsley was just as disinclined to discuss the moon as he was to consider Tarkman's clumsiness. She glanced casually into the room behind them, then moved along the veranda a little farther. Nettison, of course, followed.

"Why did you kill Tola?" she asked in a low voice, resting her fingers upon his arm.

"I told you why."

"Was that the truth?"

"If it weren't, I wouldn't change the story now anyway."

"No," slowly, "I suppose not." A pause. "I was just curious to know if Tarkman—if the D. C.—did you know he was on the A. P. A. beach when you kicked Tola?"

"No."

"You're quite sure?"

"I didn't even know it was Tola I'd kicked until—well, until afterward."

"Not until he was dead! You—you expect me to believe that, Mr. Nettison?"

Nettison laughed.

"You sound like a district attorney." Then as Mrs. Armsley let her fingers drop away from his arm, he asked pointedly—

"You knew Tola pretty well, didn't you?"

"I was interested in his studies," coldly.

"Helped him, maybe?"

"Now and then."

"Why?"

The word was drawled, but there was no misunderstanding the fact that Nettison wanted an answer.

MRS. ARMSLEY laughed.

"It amused me to read the kind of letters he tried to write."

"Hunh. What kind of letters?"

"Oh—" a pause—"all kinds. Of course, he never presumed to write any to me."

"Of course, he didn't," dryly. "But your interest flattered him, and flattery to a fool is worse than trade gin."

"Tola wasn't a fool."

"No?" Nettison's smile was sour. "He was drunk with foolishness, Mrs. Armsley. And your interest in his schooling didn't help to sober him up."

The woman's eyes flashed upward out of the dark.

"Are you presuming to—"

"No—just telling you something you ought to know without being told."

"You are impertinent."

"I don't doubt it. But what's a little impertinence between friends?"

There was a long and rather depressing silence after this, most of the depression being felt by Mrs. Armsley who did not seem to know what she ought to say next. Presently, however, she asked in a cold, even voice—

"And I suppose you know what to expect from Tola's father?"

"Just about what everybody tells me."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"You bet."

"But—"

Mrs. Armsley stopped and evidently decided to bury the hatchet, inasmuch as her finger-tips once more rested on Nettison's arm.

"You're *quite* sure you didn't know Tarkman was on the A. P. A. beach when you kicked Tola?"

Nettison looked down into her upturned face for several long and searching seconds.

"You asked me that before and I said I didn't. What's Tarkman got to do with it?"

Mrs. Armsley's eyes, having evidently made sure that Nettison was telling the truth, roved out over the black waters of Oruna creek. Then, turning her face in the direction of Tarkman's sitting-room she said cryptically:

"And yet there are people who do not believe in luck. Funny, isn't it? Let's go inside."

Nettison turned and followed, studying the back of Mrs. Armsley's red-bronze head with unflattering intentness. Presently, looking over one of the lady's milk-white shoulders, he was witness to an odd denouement.

A Kroo-house-boy was clearing away the cards and Dr. Armsley, still lounging in his chair, was holding a glittering, green drink out toward the lamp-light at arm's length. There was no sign of Tarkman.

"Where is Mr. Tarkman, Frank?" Mrs. Armsley asked sweetly from the veranda doorway.

Armsley did not appear to hear the question. The green liquid in the glass seemed to fascinate him beyond any possibility of interruption. Then, and without bothering to look at his wife, he said indifferently.

"Tarkman's sending a canoe down river with a cable. Lucky cuss. He's going home on Saturday's boat."

Mrs. Armsley drew a short, sharp breath and her whole body became taut as a violin string in an instant.

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"Home!" she breathed thickly, and Nettison's ears hung on to the altered sound of her voice just as they had done that afternoon in the hospital.

"To Garhampton?"

"Green is a beautiful color," the doctor murmured absently as, with evident reluctance, he drank and rose. "I think we'd better toddle back to the bungalow. It's late."

And this, as far as Nettison was concerned, for that evening was all.

X

MASAI'S forty-paddle canoe swept silently alongside the Government wharf next morning.

His arrival had, of course, been anticipated by every one on the Government beach, so that there was nothing in the nature of a surprize in the occurrence. But, since speculation as to what his attitude was likely to be had been rife in official and unofficial minds alike, his wallowing advance upon Tarkman's office was strewn with questions that were seen rather than heard.

Nettison, who had slept in the residency, was in the D.C.'s office when the chief appeared. Tarkman was at his desk and, as Nettison had had no difficulty in noting, was much quieter than he had been the night before.

Evidently, having finally decided to allow Dr. Armsley to invalid him home, Tarkman had slept better than he had done in a long while; as if he had rid himself of a great weight and was already preparing to feel much better because of it.

He had not mentioned the matter to Nettison at all; not so much as a syllable; and, as far from resenting the omission, Nettison was glad the man had managed to gain enough grip upon his nerves to put, even for a little while, so decided a clamp upon his tongue.

Masai's appearance in the doorway of the office was met by a few seconds of silence that seemed the most fitting preliminary to such an occasion.

He was clothed as he always was when he visited the Government beach, but the orange blazer, in keeping with the aspect of bereavement that surrounded him, seemed to have paled off to a lemon yellow.

Attended by his usual retinue of underlings and hangers-on, he paused in the doorway, panama hat in hand, as if he were not altogether sure he would be granted admission.

And it was at once apparent, as his little, pin-point black eyes shifted uneasily from Tarkman to Nettison, that his attitude was going to be as humble and conciliatory as the Government and Nettison's gun cared to demand.

Plainly, Masai did not like Nettison's gun. And whether or not the chief observed that the weapon was now slung within convenient reach of Nettison's left hand, he did seem to suspect that the temporary loss of a hand had not affected Nettison's efficiency to any appreciable extent.

"Good morning, chief," Tarkman said bruskly, but after the manner of an automaton that had suddenly been given a tongue.

Masai nodded and gulped, and a great, pudgy hand went up to the amulet at his throat.

"I come talk palaver li'l bit," he announced. "You catch time foh talk?"

"Come in," Tarkman ordered. "But tell all man go 'way. D.C. office no be so-so trade beach shop."

This was just routine work so far. Always Tarkman said something of the kind and always Masai grunted an order to his numerous lackeys, who, just as usual, drew back a few shuffling paces to hang around in plain sight until Masai would come out again.

Presently the chief had waddled to a chair beside Tarkman's desk, the punkah boy was putting a little more energy into the monotonous job of pulling upon a punkah rope, the D.C. was offering Masai the usual cigaret, and only the presence of Nettison and his gun was foreign to the customary situation.

"Be Tola palaver you come talk," Tarkman asked in a lowered voice that had a kind of husky fear in it.

"Li'l bit. I sorry too much foh that thing." And Masai glanced apprehensively at Nettison's wounded arm. "My son he be fool. Knife palaver be fool palaver all time. I no *savez* knife palaver. And I come talk foh you so you no go make gov'ment palaver foh me."

Nettison's eyes narrowed slowly. Tarkman's widened and he said quickly—just a little too quickly, Nettison thought.

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"Be so I talk foh all man foh A.P.A. beach. Suppose white man kick black man li'l bit so-so kick—knife palaver no live foh dot."

"Eh-heh!"

Masai approved with a whining groan, and the huge expanse of yellow blazer began to sway gently from side to side.

"Knife palaver be fool palaver all time." Then, as though he did not want to be too hard in his judgment of the frailties of human nature—"Maybe so, them time black man catch too much gin—"

"Or he no *savez* propah woman long time?"

Tarkman supplied hastily, thereby betraying too eager a desire to assist the chief in his flagrant endorsement of his, Tarkman's defence of Nettison on the A.P.A. beach.

"Eh-heh! Be so I talk. Gin palaver or woman palaver fit to make all man be fool for him head or him belly. But li'l bit so-so kick—"

Masia completed it by shaking his head most mournfully to indicate that there was neither an excuse nor an explanation for Tola's supreme example of foolishness.

Tarkman glanced quickly up at Nettison, who was idly giving his attention to a paperweight on the D.C.'s desk.

"What do you think about it?" Tarkman asked with an assumption of his most judicial manner. "Masai seems to agree with us that Tola was a fool and deserved what he got."

"That's good," Nettison said quietly; and then in pidgin-English for Masai's benefit—"Some time black man be fool and some time white man be fool, and no man *savez* what thing make him go craze for him head. I sorry too much that Tola be fool. Maybe so two or three day pass, I go catch li'l bit chop foh Masai house. Palaver set."

Masai stopped his swaying motion. Tarkman's mouth opened, as if he would speak, and it stayed open without uttering a sound, while he reached mechanically for the cigaret tin. Nettison's intimation that he was going to make peace with Masai by inviting himself to dinner at Masai's house in the course of a few days, appeared to have been too sudden a bite for either of his auditors to swallow comfortably. The chief, however, was the first to get it down.

"BE GOOD," he said humbly, with a quick glance at Nettison's gun. "All same Mas' Nettison go come chop foh my house, I be glad too much. Palaver set?"

The question mark was directed at Tarkman who came sharply to his feet with an official snap that was all on the surface.

"Palaver set foh dis time. But knife palaver no good. Gov'ment no like knife palaver. Tell all man D.C. say gov'ment go make plenty trouble for all man who bring knife foh white man beach. Palaver set. Have another cigaret."

Masai took a handful, and in another minute, with as much haste as his fat would permit, he was on his way back to his canoe, leaving a flat and unreal impression behind him.

Tarkman sat down again, but Nettison remained standing.

"What do you really think of it?" the D.C. asked and probably did not know how sharp his voice sounded.

"It's all right," Nettison said easily. "He was only too glad to agree with your point of view so that you wouldn't think he had had anything to do with Tola's free and easy way with a knife. And I don't think he had."

"You believe that?"

"Of course."

"And you're going over there to eat with him?"

"You bet. The only place to get the real thing in palm oil chop is in a native village."

Tarkman knew this and was not thinking of the matter from any such angle. He sat back in his chair and looked out through an open door across a strip of Government lawn that was scorching in the heat of the early forenoon sun. At the far end of the strip of lawn was the Armsley bungalow, and hazy, indeterminate figures passed between.

"I'm going home in a week, you know," he said absently after a while.

"So Armsley said."

"And I'd like to be sure that you—that this Masai business—"

"That'll be all right. No trouble there at all."

"I hope not," slowly. "What did Mrs. Armsley have to say to you on the veranda last night?"

Nettison started slightly. Tarkman was not looking at him, but his trick of switching

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suddenly from one subject to another was none the less amazing.

"Why?"

"I just wondered."

The D.C.'s head came around, though his body did not stir.

"When you decide to go to Masai's ask Mrs. Armsley to go with you. She likes native food."

Nettison laughed because it was the safest and the only thing to do.

"And Armsley?"

"He won't mind. He hates palm oil chop and stuff of that sort and wouldn't go a foot to eat any of it. Besides—"

Tarkman stopped there and his head shifted again until he was once more looking out across the strip of lawn toward the Armsley bungalow.

"Besides—what?" Nettison prompted.

"I'd know you'd be perfectly safe if Mrs. Armsley went along."

This time Nettison laughed in real earnest, even though the statement was as cryptic as Mrs. Armsley's remark about luck the night before.

"Safe? Why? Is Mrs. Armsley a privileged character in the eyes of the Masai family?"

Tarkman perceptibly shivered and rose.

"I don't know. Perhaps she is. But if you go at all, ask her to go with you. I don't think she'd refuse."

"Hunh."

Nettison trailed Tarkman out into the sunlight, and between Nettison's eyes was a furrow with which the strong sun had nothing to do.

"When is the *Walrus* likely to arrive?"

"This afternoon."

"Because I'd like to go up to the A.P.A. beach to get Delton off my mind."

"Take my gig. I shan't want it."

"Thanks. That's fine. Going up to the hospital?"

Tarkman stopped and glanced quickly up at Nettison as if the latter had found him out.

"Just—er—just for a few minutes. Armsley—he'd like to know that there isn't going to be any fuss. Er—that is—come back before dark."

With which rather paternal instruction the D.C. turned again sharply in the direction of the hospital leaving Nettison more or less flat-footed to make his own arrangements for borrowing the gig the best he might.

Nettison walked slowly down to the waterfront. The furrow between his eyes remained, but in the eyes themselves was something akin to anticipation—a stultifying luxury in which Nettison rarely permitted himself to indulge.

But, in this case, unless he were greatly mistaken, it did seem reasonably certain that the whole truth about Tarkman, if ever it were divulged, would not be so simple or so disappointing after all.

XI

ON THE way down to the A.P.A. beach in the D.C.'s gig, Nettison had a little time to think. But it did not help very much.

It was well enough to know that Mrs. Armsley cordially hated Tarkman and, for some mysterious reason, regretted the killing of Tola on that account. It was simple to guess that Tarkman was mortally afraid of Mrs. Armsley and had been still more so while Tola lived; and it was not difficult to suspect that Dr. Armsley knew most of what it was all about, and was a great deal more in sympathy with Tarkman than he was with his wife.

All this was illuminating in its way, but it did not explain much, and except for such scattering trifles of facts as these, Nettison felt that he was still as much in the dark as ever; and in spots even more so.

However, he knew now that Tarkman's home town was a place called Garhampton, and that Garhampton was not unknown to Mrs. Armsley. Therefore it was reasonable to suppose that Tarkman's eminently respectable home ties were familiar to the lady, either because she had come into personal contact with them or had listened most attentively at some time or other when Tarkman—as a man was likely to do with a woman—had been much more confidential than he possibly cared to think about when the fascinating spell of Mrs. Armsley's bronze-red hair and deep black eyes had passed.

This was mere conjecture, of course, but in a place like Oruna, where Mrs. Armsley was the only white woman, it was good conjecture, even if it did not explain Tola, or Mrs. Armsley's suggested immunity from harm at the hands of Masai and his people, and actually ran contrary to Dr. Armsley's sympathetic attitude toward Tarkman.

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There was, however, nothing of conjecture in Mrs. Armsley's disinclination to believe that Oruna's D.C. had had no hand in Tola's death. Such a consummation, from Mrs. Armsley's point of view, was apparently too lucky to be true—whatever this might mean. And it had obviously bothered and irritated her so much that she had been unable to refrain from asking Nettison questions about it.

Therefore, she had been fully aware that Tarkman was more than anxious to have Tola removed in some way or other. And Nettison was quite sure that whatever kind of nuisance Tola had been making of himself as far as Tarkman was concerned, Mrs. Armsley had been at some considerable pains to encourage him.

This was not nice. It suggested to Nettison, who disliked mud of any kind, that the mud around Oruna was not confined to the river's bed.

Then he thought of Masai. He had no intention of going to the village of Oruna to eat palm oil chop with the chief. When he went to pay Masai a visit he did not think there would be the time or the inclination to eat.

Yet, though he did not have any faith whatever in the sincerity of Masai's humility, he was almost tempted to keep his dinner engagement with the chief just to find out why Mrs. Armsley's company on such an excursion should be an assurance of safe conduct.

DELTON, of the A.P.A. recognized the D.C.'s gig long before it reached his gig-wharf. But he betrayed none of the surprize he felt when Nettison stepped from the gig and finally came to rest in a Madeira chair on the A.P.A. veranda.

"Hello," the trading agent grunted heavily as he came out of his office. "Thought you were in jail. How's the arm?"

Nettison said the arm was fine, then asked what had become of the things he had left in his canoe, which, as he had discovered on his way past the breakwater, had been emptied of all his immediate belongings.

"I salvaged 'em," Delton explained. "How much for that brass and needle work you brought me?"

Nettison ignored the question.

"Just had an interview with Masai in Tarkman's office," he said quietly, knowing perfectly well what Delton wanted to listen to first.

"Yes? And what did the fat old fox have to say?"

Nettison told him and Delton nodded somberly. Apparently Masai's conciliatory pose did not surprize him in the least.

"There's a lot of depth to Masai in more ways than one. What are you going to do?"

"Anything you like."

"I? What have I got to go with it?"

"It happened on your beach, and Masai will probably remember that when he's forgotten about me. Any suggestion to make?"

"About what?"

"About what to do to him."

"To do—what the—no, sir! I have all the trouble I want and I'm too fat anyway."

A pause, in which Delton shouted for a boy to bring the inevitable drinks.

"What does Tarkman think? He looked badly rattled yesterday."

"Tarkman's going home."

Delton's eyebrows ascended sharply.

"Home—eh? I didn't know he'd been out that long." And here Delton plainly did some mental arithmetic. "Why, he's only been out nine months this trip. Came out on the same boat with Mrs. Armsley. What's the matter with him?"

"He didn't say," Nettison equivocated quietly, and silently added one more illuminating fact to his collection. "Special leave of some sort, I guess."

This time Delton's eyebrows descended and he regarded Nettison skeptically.

"Is that what he calls it?" he growled after a while.

"He doesn't call it anything. Why? What's your notion?"

"Haven't any," shortly and with a hint of restlessness. "Boy!"

"I bring um, sah," a house-boy answered at once from the vicinity of the sideboard in the dining-room. "I bring um one time, sah."

Delton settled himself deeper in his chair, avoided Nettison's eyes and glanced past him up river. Evidently he had his own ideas upon Tarkman's sudden decision to go home, and "special leave" did not satisfy him as an explanation.

"Where's the *Walrus?*" he asked presently, just for something to say, because the silence was becoming rather strained and awkward.

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Nettison told him and added that he expected the launch to arrive in Oruna that afternoon with the gracious assistance of the Government.

"Hunh. Tarkman's a pretty good friend of yours?" And Delton's glance strayed significantly down to the gig-wharf where the D.C.'s gig was tied up. "He's pretty fussy about loaning the Government's property or time to anybody. And you ought to be in jail. How do you manage it?"

Nettison smiled and the arrival of the house-boy with the drinks helped him to change the subject, and for the succeeding half hour Delton and he haggled over the value of the Hausa brass and needlework that had been in Nettison's canoe, just as if the price really mattered to either of them.

But it was evident that Delton's customary enthusiasm for business of the kind was lacking, and when Nettison's account with the A.P.A. at Oruna had been duly credited, so that he could draw upon it to the extent of a pair of rainboots, some canned goods and several necessary shirts, Delton's final, growling protest against the quality of the shirts Nettison thought he ought to get did not carry much conviction. And presently, after a few rather sour minutes of silence, he asked:

"Did you meet Mrs. Armsley up there?" And a heavy hand gestured in the direction of the Government beach.

"You bet. Fine looking woman, isn't she?"

Delton nodded slowly.

"She comes down here for supplies every once in a while; and my shop and beach clerks won't talk to each other for a week after she's been here. She seems to thrive on this —— country. Talk to her much?"

"Not much."

Delton grinned.

"Maybe she did the talking? She thought a lot of Tola, you know?"

"Did she?" simply. "Why?"

"So if you've got any ideas in your head about Masai, don't tell 'em to her."

Nettison's surprize was not all affected.

"What does that mean?"

Delton took a long drink out of the glass at his elbow; and, upon a par with Armsley or Tarkman or even Masai himself, he was not trying to be mysterious simply for the sake of being so.

They were, all of them, just coasters; and after several years of residence in the swamp belt, where the voices of the bush whisper suggestively but never talk out loud, white men, as well as black, naturally acquire the trick of saying too little rather than too much, and of saying that little as carefully as possible.

"I don't know that I know just what it does mean," Delton said finally. "Armsley's an odd cuss anyway. I met him first about seven years ago in Lagos, and I've never had to change my mind about him. Are you going to slope as soon as you get the *Walrus* repaired?"

"I guess so," simply. "No sense in hanging around here to have my head examined by a machete."

Delton nodded. He knew Nettison had no intention of running away, but he did not question the statement any more than Nettison made any further effort to probe deeper into Delton's private information on the Armsleys.

And presently Nettison was once more seated in the D.C.'s gig, slipping away from the A.P.A. gig-wharf and heading up river.

"If you decide to stick around," Delton suggested from the wharf, "come down here and eat any time. I'll hold your canoe until you come and get it."

"Thanks. And don't forget to indent for those shirts. I know you haven't anything as good as that in stock."

Delton's remarks upon this insult were made in a mixture of tongues, all of them, with variations, saying the same thing. Then, when Nettison's smile had passed beyond the range of any kind of vituperation, Delton turned slowly and thoughtfully from the gig-wharf in the direction of his office.

Arrived there, he clumped into the swivel chair before his desk and for many long and serious minutes, sat tapping the butt of an empty revolver on the blotter before him.

There was nothing of militant significance in this revolver. Delton used it as a paperweight. But as he made dents in the blotter with the butt of it, his heavy, good humored face became less and less agreeable.

After he had, several times, gone out to the veranda and glowered up river toward the Government beach, only to return to his desk to make more dents in the blotter, he finally grabbed a pen, wrote a *chit* and called a boy.

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"Go find Dr. Armsley foh Gov'ment beach. Give him this *chit*. *Savez?*"

"Yessah."

Evidently Delton felt much better after the boy had gone.

XII

THE *Walrus*, towed up from Kitchell's beach, reached the government wharf at Oruna early that afternoon. And with the assistance of a colored engineer, loaned in nervous generosity by Tarkman, Nettison at once proceeded to put the launch into commission again.

Obviously, the colored engineer did not like to be associated with anything so disreputable as the *Walrus*, and his contempt for the launch, struggling with an indubitable and necessary respect for Nettison, supplied him with the ingredients for a most uncomfortable afternoon.

Nettison paid no attention to him; nor to any one or anything until, shortly after dark, the *Walrus* indicated, beyond any doubt, a willingness to proceed upon Nettison's business and to continue to do so as long as the gasoline held out.

By that time, Dr. Armsley had answered Delton's note in person, and had returned to the Government beach. So that there was nothing of coincidence in the circumstance that the doctor was standing at the wharf-head when the colored engineer thankfully headed for home and Nettison finally emerged from the bowels of the *Walrus*.

"Hello, Nettison. How does the arm feel? Haven't tried to use it, have you?"

"Hello, Armsley. The arm's fine. Do I have to wait around till you take out the stitches?"

"Not unless you want to. Any doctor can take them out. Why? Thinking of getting under way?"

"Guess I'd better. I have the heels now, and I think I'll use them."

Armsley's chin lifted sharply.

"Thought you were going to eat palm oil chop with Masai?"

"Not this evening."

"When?"

"I don't know yet."

This was followed by a pause, in which Armsley seemed to be at a loss to prolong the conversation. A dusky, uncertain figure passed the tail end of the wharf and from the opposite direction a watch-boy with a swinging hurricane lantern approached lazily.

"Want to wash up?" Armsley asked suddenly, and, turning his face toward the residency, took a step or two in that direction.

"Oh, I can manage," Nettison said simply and did not stir. "This," with a nod at the *Walrus*, "is where I live, you know."

Armsley had stopped short and was facing Nettison again.

"Yes," slowly, "I suppose so. But I thought you'd be more comfortable up at my bungalow."

Nettison's eyes widened a little, then narrowed. An invitation to wash up at the Armsley bungalow had not been numbered among his expectations. But he thought it would be just as well to refuse—which was normal—and find out how anxious the doctor really was to have him visit the bungalow.

"Thanks very much. That's—— decent of you. But I'll be getting under way in a little while and——"

"Better see Tarkman before you go," Armsley interrupted with a faint trace of authority in his tone.

"You bet."

"Then you won't——"

"Frank? Dr. Armsley?"

"——!"

Armsley's expletive did not rise above a whisper, but it was none the less emphatic, in direct contrast to the soft, mildly questioning voice that had called his name.

This voice had come from the tail end of the wharf with a suddenness that was startling even to Nettison who was facing that way. And as Mrs. Armsley came down the wharf, swinging lithely and soundlessly toward them out of the dark, Nettison was again instantly conscious of her kinship with the larger cats, and of her truly catlike tendency to seem more at home in the dark than in the light.

Conversation, as far as the doctor and Nettison were concerned, ceased. They awaited Mrs. Armsley's approach in a state of suspended animation that, in the doctor's case, appeared likely to explode in almost any direction.

"Oh, it is you," Mrs. Armsley said simply when she was near enough to recognize the doctor. "I wondered if you had come back

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from the A.P.A. and I was beginning to think I'd have to take dinner alone." Then, to Nettison, to whom she smiled pleasantly—"You've had a busy afternoon, haven't you?"

"Some," calmly.

"I hope you are quite satisfied with the result?"

"Oh, she'll run all right."

"As fast as ever?"

"Maybe a little faster."

"And speed, in the life you lead, is a necessity, isn't it?"

"All right, Nettison," Armsley broke in, moving up the wharf. "Don't forget to let me have another look at the arm before you go."

"So soon!" Mrs. Armsley exclaimed looking at Nettison in soft surprize. "Surely you're not thinking of running away!"

"You bet."

The woman laughed and lingered although Armsley showed no disposition to await her pleasure.

"Well, you are frank enough about it," she said in a voice that hinted at a sheathed claw. "And I've heard that your launch is very fast. How long will it take you to reach Segwanga?"

Nettison saw the claw now; not much of one, perhaps, but yet a claw. So he smiled and said simply:

"I'm not going there. Mrs. Lakin is in Lagos, you know."

The doctor, several paces away, emitted a kind of strangled cough and paused. Mrs. Armsley's bronze-red head snapped back just a little, and the glint of her eyes seemed to disappear for a second or two.

"Yes, of course."

The voice had a thick and husky note; the same note that, upon an earlier occasion had struck an odd, far-off chord of memory in Nettison's ears.

"Mrs. Lakin *has* gone to Lagos. And Segwanga without Mrs. Lakin—"

A nervous laugh, in keeping with the change in her voice, completed it. Then Nettison saw her carelessly outflung hand.

"Good-by, Mr. Nettison. I hope the engine won't break down when you need it most."

The tips of her fingers just barely touched Nettison's left hand; and then she had swung away from him up the wharf, her swift, noiseless tread and supple swinging carriage making the doctor's careless, slouching gait appear elderly and trudging by comparison.

Presently, Nettison was also alone, with a suddenly deeper sense of queerness and unreality settling about him. The whole atmosphere seemed all at once to be charged with it, and he had a feeling that from innuendo to innuendo, he had traveled to the rim of the unbelievable, and that, by simply reaching out his hand—

As a general thing, Niger Nettison was not given to shuddering. But as his one good hand fell with significant limpness to his side, a slight shiver coursed down his spine.

There was no tangible reason for this; nothing more than a hint here and there that, in a sudden few and gasping seconds, had culminated in a flash of the brightest kind of light searching out the dark.

Just whether this flash of light actually had found what it searched for, Nettison was not prepared to say. He did not really believe it had, because the thing seemed utterly impossible. And yet—

He slipped down into the *Walrus* with a wondering look in his quiet gray eyes; a look that hesitated.

Then, a few minutes later, with nothing but the low, sure-voiced *phut, phut* of the launch to intimate his departure, he was slipping away from the Government wharf in the general direction of mid-stream.

TARKMAN, who had been sitting on his veranda, waiting for Nettison to come upstairs, reached the wharf-end on the run, fluently swearing at the watch-boy who trailed behind.

"Which place he go?" the D.C. demanded. "Bushman! You no get eye?"

The watch-boy could not see the *Walrus*, but his ears were good and he could hear her.

"Up river, sah."

"You're sure?"

"Yessah."

Tarkman paused and gave himself a chance to recover his breath. Up river might mean anything or nothing; but, specifically, it did not mean the village of Oruna which lay in the opposite direction.

"No use following him," Tarkman confided nervously to the watch-boy who was not interested one way or the other. "We'd never catch him."

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"Yessah," the boy said dutifully.

"Oh, go to the ——!"

"Yessah."

The watch-boy's scuffling naked feet whispered off into the blackness, and Tarkman stood on the wharf-end staring stupidly up river.

He was very grateful to Nettison; much more so than Nettison would ever be likely to have an opportunity to realize. At least Tarkman hoped so; and hoped also, most fervently, that he would never see him again. Particularly in Oruna.

XIII

FOR several days, as far as Oruna was concerned, Nettison's whereabouts were something of a mystery. Confusing reports, brought down to the trading beaches, established fleeting visions of the *Walrus* in widely different locations at the same time, so that all such information quickly became less and less reliable.

Apparently, however, the uncertainty of Nettison's movements did not seem to have any effect upon Tarkman's determination to sail for home the following Saturday; and, early on Friday morning he went aboard the Government launch *Vixen*, which would carry him down to Gana Gana, where he would connect with the stern-wheeler *Kwali* and thereafter proceed to Forcados and the mail boat.

Dr. Armsley, who continued to sip green drinks and to avoid his wife as much as possible, was down at the wharf when the *Vixen* departed. He seemed to think it was perfectly all right for Tarkman to leave before his relieving successor had arrived.

Captain Miller, who was in charge of the Transport Department, was not quite so sure about it, particularly since Tarkman did not look or act as if he should be invalided at all. And Mrs. Armsley, who was not down at the wharf, evidently agreed with Miller.

At least, she chose this hour of freedom from husbandly restraint to lose her temper with a house-boy and to attempt the somewhat unorthodox trick of trying to smash the wash basin over his head.

A man could have used a water cooler, and it would possibly have smashed. But a wash basin was too hard and just a trifle too unwieldy for the purpose.

In any event, the little episode, coming off in the daytime, and in the morning particularly, would have startled even the doctor; and had Nettison been privileged to see Mrs. Armsley's face just then, his conception of the unbelievable would not have seemed quite so impossible after all.

Then Mrs. Armsley sat down. Not in a chair, however. She sat down upon her bed in a curled-up, stoop-shouldered fashion behind drawn mosquito curtains. And the slumberous light in her deep black eyes flashed and dimmed in a sullen rage that almost seemed to make her carefully manicured nails develop into the claws Nettison had figuratively given her.

Even her bronze-red hair, somewhat dishevelled, appeared to take on a more fiery glow, and her posture in the matter of brooding savagery, left little to be desired.

Had Armsley seen even a suggestion of this, he would have known that his wife was going out that evening. Most of the time she did not go very far; just far enough, apparently, to get away from lamps and other softening evidences of civilization and respectability.

But occasionally, as a kind of climax to a long and seething interval—

And this, as Armsley would have known, was a preliminary to one of these occasions; possibly, according to all the signs, the greatest of them all.

Nettison, who was waiting for the *Vixen* in a dark little side creek just above Daraka, would have liked to wager it would also be the last.

DARAKA was the place where Frawling of the Treasury Department was still trying to find out why Pellington, the A. D. C. in charge of the government station there, had permitted himself to be deprived of his keys and, subsequently, of a sizable sum of the government's money.

Pellington, himself, had been unable to give much information on the matter. Apparently he had been suddenly encouraged to go to sleep for about fourteen hours by having a sponge-like handful of decayed Yaka roots clapped over his mouth and nose. And he had slept and dreamed, as Yaka juice victims were likely to do, that he was having a splendid time of it killing an uncle he had always hated.

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When he woke up, at noon of the following day, the uncle, according to a letter the mail had just brought in, was still as alive and as disagreeable as ever, but the keys and the Government's money were gone.

Pellington, who was young and handsome and appropriately normal, did not have the faintest idea who had clapped the chloroform-like mess of Yaka roots over his mouth and nose, and he could not remember with any distinctness what he had been doing when it happened.

It had been past dinner time and he had been alone in his sitting-room trying to finish a letter—no, the letter had been abandoned and he had picked up a book—wait a moment— He couldn't have been reading because he hadn't been facing the windows looking out on the creek. He knew this much. And as the chair he always sat in when he read, did face that way, he couldn't possibly have been reading; not at that moment.

Also, there had been the knee in the middle of his back; yes, he remembered that quite distinctly; the knee. He could still feel it there. The knee in the middle of his back, the spongy, nauseating, evil-smelling mess slapped over his mouth and nose, and—and well, confound it; that was really all he did remember. No preliminary fuss of any kind; no struggle; no warning that gave him any chance even to think of fighting. And he woke up in bed. Such was Pellington's official contribution.

Nettison's was different.

He had been indulging in the West African failing for being mysterious on his own account in the past few days, and by piecing together some carefully acquired information, gathered from sources that were as select as they had been judiciously scattered he had concluded his investigations with a midnight call upon Delton of the A. P. A. And Delton, having had his talk with Armsley, agreed with Nettison, for once in his life, without any qualification whatever.

However, Nettison did not imagine Tarkman, when he came along in the *Vixen*, was going to be over glad to see him; not if the D. C. really were going home, which Nettison now had some reason to doubt.

But the kind of things he had learned in the past few days suggested it would be better all around if Tarkman stayed to see at least one of these things through to a finish. He knew the D. C. would feel much more respectable afterwards if he did.

Daraka was about twenty five miles from Oruna. So that it was still comparatively early in the forenoon when the *Walrus* nosed out of the little side creek to signal to the speedily approaching *Vixen* to come to a full stop.

Several minutes later, as far as the occupants of the ambling trade canoes on Daraka creek were concerned, the *Vixen* was docilely following the disreputable looking *Walrus* into the privacy of the most shadow-darkened corner of the little side creek; and, still later, the *Vixen* emerged alone and proceeded, according to schedule, to meet the stern-wheeler *Kwali* at Gana Gana.

Tarkman's baggage was still on board. But Tarkman, himself, was sitting on one of the bench-like seats in the *Walrus's* little cabin. He was smoking a cigaret as usual, but he was blowing the smoke in the general direction of his boots which, just then, approximated the location of his soul.

Nettison, seated opposite, with his revolver resting in business-like fashion on his left knee, waited until he was sure the *Vixen* was out of hearing, then slipped the gun back into its holster with a grim but nonetheless appreciative smile.

Kidnapping a district commissioner was not an everyday occurence.

XIV

"That wasn't exactly cricket," Tarkman mumbled after a moment or two of the unhappiest kind of silence, and tried to be nonchalant about it. "You invited me in here on a friendly pretext and then held me up."

"You wouldn't have stayed if I hadn't."

"Of course not!"

Tarkman's eyes lifted at the preposterousness of such a suggestion. But Nettison's quiet smile made the eyes drop again and after another minute, Tarkman said rather thickly:

"I wasn't going home in any case. Just taking a trip down to St. Paul de Loands and back. It was Armsley's idea and it seemed to me—queer, uncanny beggar, Armsley, don't you think?"

Nettison nodded absently. He had found reason to form his own private opinion of Dr. Armsley in the past few days, and he had had to confess that, unusual as the Tarkman case was almost hourly proving

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itself to be, it was doubtful whether the doctor was really the principal character in it. Like Pellington of Daraka and others of lesser ilk, Tarkman was just the ultra-respectable victim of an unbelievably malicious circumstance.

But Armsley, slouching carelessly in the background, and coming out into the limelight only to display a fondness for green drinks—

"Why are you doing this?" Tarkman asked of his boots after a while. "Why don't you just go north and get away from it? With the *Walrus* repaired there's nothing to prevent you and—" his glance came up a second or two to search Nettison's face—"it's such a rotten mess."

Nettison knew it was, even though the whole story was still far from told; Tarkman's end of it particularly. And he nursed his right arm in its sling as if he were protecting it from further harm.

"I'd like to find that money," he said simply.

"Pellington's?" Tarkman's chin had come up with a jerk.

"He isn't telling any more than you are—not to Frawling at any rate."

"No," nervously. "No. I suppose not."

"And," Nettison concluded definitely, "if we find the Daraka money we'll find other things that have gone astray—here and elsewhere."

"Other things? Elsewhere?" Tarkman looked frightened.

"Don't bluff," Nettison advised easily. "Oruna's the end, not the beginning. You know that, don't you?"

Tarkman stared stupidly. "The end," he murmured in a lifeless tone. "The end?"

Then with a sudden and characteristic flare of resentment:

"Why the —— don't you leave it alone? What business is it of yours? You killed Tola and I'm grateful for that, but I won't be hounded and harried—"

"Shut up," quietly. "Pellington has the excuse of being young and a fool, and he hasn't had time to think yet. You are neither young nor a fool and you've thought too much. And I suppose there's a girl in Garhampton you want to be respectable enough to marry?"

"—— you, Nettison—"

"Sit down," simply and without stirring an inch from his place. "That kind of drama isn't worth a hoot. Not now. It's time to chuck respectability overboard when it begins to develop a yellow streak. And that's awful old stuff at that."

Tarkman sat down slowly, visibly shaking from the strain upon his overcharged nerves.

"What—what do *you* know about Garhampton?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Nothing. But you're the son of a vicar or a bishop—"

"A bishop," Tarkman offered mechanically.

"And it's about time a respectable man like you were married to some—"

"You—you are impertinent!"

Nettison threw his head back and laughed softly, a goading sound that brought Tarkman to his feet, his normally pallid face pale with an indignant fury.

"My private affairs, Nettison, and particularly my impending marriage to the lady I hope to make my wife, are matters which I refuse to have bandied—"

"Shucks! Your private affairs aren't worthy of any more respect than you are—however much that is."

Tarkman paused, stared and searched for words that fitted. Nettison, however, went right on, quietly and without taking his steady gray eyes from the D. C.'s unusually pale face.

"I'm not a sentimentalist, Tarkman. But I guess I have as much respect for love and marriage and the conventional propagation of the race as the average. Just the same, I haven't much use for the kind of romance and respectability that makes sneaks and liars out of otherwise perfectly decent men and women. And you are one of the men right now; sneaking and lying and shuffling from under, and at the same time snivelling about the respect that is due your private affairs!"

"But—but—the circumstances!" Tarkman managed to whisper thickly. "You seem to forget or know nothing about the extenuating circumstances of—"

"There aren't any. There never are. If you get yourself into a jam, you've got to get yourself out, and that's all there is to this or any other kind of mess a man gets into."

"You mean—you mean there is never any excuse for—"

"There's never any excuse for anything. A thing is or it isn't—right or wrong, win or lose, to endure or to die. There's no halfway house. You're in this and you've got

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to get out clean—or jump overboard on the way to St. Paul de— What was Armsley's notion?"

Tarkman did not answer this. He was studying Nettison's face with a curiously steady stare that was almost child-like, and presently he said with a simple, questioning note in his voice:

"To endure—or to die. Right or wrong, win or lose, to endure—or to die?" A pause. "That's it, Nettison—exactly. I've been trying to think—to get hold of something—in a few words, you know—something easy to remember and hold on to, and—and—to endure or to die?" A longer pause, then whisperingly— "That's what I want. Exactly. Thanks, Nettison. I'll remember that."

Nettison rose and strolled toward the cabin companion.

"I'll be out on deck if you want me," he said in a matter of fact tone.

"All right. Thanks."

Tarkman's voice was thick with relief and gratitude mingled. He wanted nothing so much as to be left alone, and when Nettison had gone out on deck, the D. C.'s head descended into his trembling hands and stayed there for a long time.

But when the head finally lifted, the hands, lowering shakingly to his knees, became tightly clenched. And presently, Oruna's D. C., who was also the son of a bishop, might have been heard breathing this heretical defiance:

"No! I won't! I won't pray! That's just another way to snivel—and shuffle from under—putting the burden on God!"

XV

AT HIGH noon, in the village of Oruna, the stark, dust-gray figures of men spread-eagled the shadows, leaving the blinding glare of the open places to the lizards and the dragon-flies. Life paused and did not generate enough energy even to grunt or groan.

Certainly it did not do more than open one eye to mark the arrival of a scrawny native in a loin-cloth who jogged up the path from the creek side and came to a dubious halt in the thickly breathing quiet of Chief Masai's compound.

There was nothing unusual about the appearance of this native; not even the sandy color of his hair, for red-headed natives were not uncommon in the Delta. Flat-nosed, thick-lipped, with the shiny black, putty-like markings of his tribe upon his forehead and cheeks, he was just a canoe-boy whose existence, normally, was of no particular consequence to any one.

Just then, however, his situation was not normal. He was a man of destiny.

His birth place had been the shadow of a blood-plum tree, which, according to the standards of the Delta swamps, had a blithely immoral significance of its own. And his mother, who had not been deaf to the sort of romance of which the blood-plum tree was the beneficent deity, had called his name Alali, which is "a son of joy."

Subsequently, in spite of many things which, upon the mangrove-haunted banks of the Lower Niger, tend to prevent sons of joy arriving at man's estate, Alali had lived and borne and dragged his scrawny body through unnumbered vicissitudes so that he might one day stand hesitating in the compound of Chief Masai with a message of death upon the tip of his tongue.

The message was for Chief Masai himself and was to be delivered only to the chief. What the chief would think of it, Alali did not know, but Alali did not think much of it himself, principally because the dolt-like quality of his intelligence did not permit him to think, with any acuteness, upon anything.

When he was told to do, he did. When he was told to go, he went. And questioned not at all. So when, in his own tongue, he was given a message to deliver to Masai, he could be depended upon to deliver this message, word for word, adding nothing and taking nothing away.

But the mid-day quiet of Chief Masai's compound made him pause, and as he stood there, with stertorously breathing, log-like shapes of men hugging the shadows all about him, Alali's sand-colored hair occupied the flaring spotlight of the sun without any competition whatever.

Chief Masai, resting his huge black bulk upon a mosquito-curtained English bed within the darkest and coolest room of his house, was not asleep. He was thinking too much.

Usually there was a simple directness about Masai's methods of thought that would have appealed to a mathematician. From a given point to a given point was

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always a straight line with Masai, and whenever necessity compelled him to make a detour, he obeyed only with extreme reluctance, possibly because he disliked dragging his fat around.

This was one of the reluctant occasions. The processes of thought were becoming, of necessity, more and more involved almost every minute; a condition which had begun when Nettison had so blandly invited himself to dinner "two or three day pass."

These two or three days had come and gone, but Nettison had not yet come to eat at Masai's table. Instead he had gone here, there and everywhere, buzzing about the ears of the Oruna district like a pestiferous mangrove fly.

And as one result of all this buzzing on Nettison's part, Masai was thinking now, with a kind of child-like simplicity and definiteness, that the safest and easiest way to kill Nettison would be to shoot him with a white man's gun; Pellington's for preference. This, in itself, was evidence enough that Masai's thinking had become very intricate; even subtle.

However, as Masai was aware, it was not nearly so intricate or far-fetched as it appeared. He knew Pellington was young and a fool and that he was not telling any of the truth about what he had been doing when the Government's money had been stolen at Daraka. And Masai knew this because the money—silver, gold and some paper—was under his, Masai's, bed at that moment.

The money had not always been there; only since the day after Tola's dark and shameful burial, when Masai had found the money hidden in a hole in the floor of Tola's house. And the chief was not altogether sure as yet whether it would be quite safe to keep the money or find some means of returning it to the Government so that the Government would appropriately thank him and, later on, give him a chance to take a crack at the poorly protected Daraka safe on his own account.

Masai liked money well enough. But burgling Government station safes had not occurred to him until Tola's gifts of higher education had pointed the way. However the chief was not too old to learn and when Nettison had been disposed of—

This brought him back to Pellington and his gun.

He knew that Daraka's assistant district commissioner was becoming hourly more and more afraid of Nettison, and that Nettison and the A. D. C. had had quarrelsome words on the Daraka Government wharf the previous afternoon; or, to be more exact, the A. D. C. had done the quarreling and Nettison had listened for a little while and had then taken his departure in the *Walrus*.

All this Masai had learned because he had made it his business to try to keep an eye on Nettison at all times, and to observe, both day and night, just how the Daraka situation was developing.

Therefore he had come to the conclusion that Pellington's gun—the least likely-to-be-suspected weapon in the hands of a native—would be the safest medium for his, Masai's, purposes; and since Daraka's A. D. C. would possibly be very glad to get rid of Nettison, the chief felt that he was, in some measure, conferring a favor upon him.

HE WAS in the midst of completing the details of this decision when Alali, the son of joy, stopped hesitating in the middle of the compound and, setting his mechanism once more in motion, proceeded as straight toward Masai as the organization of the chief's household would permit.

Masai did not know that Alali existed and did not want to know it. Particularly then. For there was still some thinking to be done before the actual shooting of Niger Nettison could be considered in the light of finished business.

Also, the chief disliked interruptions at any time; more specifically the kind of interruptions that tended to upset his thinking and compel him to start all over again.

However, Alali had a message to deliver which he had been told to deliver without any regard for Masai's likes or dislikes in the matter. And when he had made clear the imperative character of his mission to the chief's one hundred and twenty-fourth wife who, for the nonce, was the guardian of his peace, it duly came to pass that Alali, properly introduced, kneeled respectfully upon one knee beside the chief's bed and looked upon a black mountain of fat that was visibly alive only in the eyes.

Masai's eyes, just then, were smaller even than usual. His pudgy hands rested easily upon his stomach, one over the other, and he regarded Alali with a kind of elephantine

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solemnity for at least a minute before he said anything at all.

He decided he did not like Alali. He did not like his sand-colored hair, his scrawny body or the stupid absence of fear in his expression. Masai expected and required the under-dog to be afraid of him. It was a great part of his reward for being Masai. And when he took the trouble to dislike any one so inconsequent as Alali, he did not go to the added bother of searching his mind for reasons. Presently, without giving the canoe-boy permission to rise, he grunted shortly in Ijo:

"Speak. Is the tongue of Alali as a withered leaf?"

And the canoe-boy, paying no attention to the chief's belittling reference to his tongue, said mechanically:

"This is the word: When it is dark and there is no moon, the Red Cat will come to the house of Masai. And Masai will sit in his house and fold his hands upon his belly till the Red Cat speaks low in his ear. This is the word the Red Cat speaks to Masai by the mouth of Alali the canoe-boy."

Masai's eyes almost opened wide. Evidently, he had no difficulty in interpreting Alali's message and obviously he did not like it; particularly that part of it which asked him to remain inactive until he was given permission to move.

And in an instant, Alali's sand-colored hair became as a red rag to a large black bull. It became a subtle insult; a kind of banner, deliberately chosen by the spectacular Red Cat to be flaunted like a sneer in the face of Masai.

The chief's eyes closed altogether. His pudgy hands, even then resting upon his rotund belly, fell away, and he gruntingly moved his ponderous bulk so that he lay upon his left side.

Alali waited, still upon one knee, his expression just as stupidly free from fear as ever.

Masai's eyes opened again slowly. Somewhere in the house or the compound one of his wives was arguing in a necessarily subdued crescendo with another of his wives. The grass mat that hung over the solitary window of the room excluding both light and air, flapped lazily, and, all at once, a streak of bright sunlight struck Alali's bent back between the shoulder blades. Masai smiled and his right hand hovered over his waist-band.

"The Red Cat speaks to Masai—"

His left hand leaped and fastened all five pudgy fingers in the detested sand-colored hair, drawing the head suddenly toward him so that the blade in his right hand might strike where the sun had struck.

"And Masai speaks to the Red Cat."

Alali's gurgling scream thickened sharply and whispered off into silence. The five pudgy fingers released their grip upon his hair, and, as his body slipped to the floor, the blade of the trading shop jack knife was thrust into the mattress several times so that it might be made clean again.

A very few minutes later, Masai rested upon his back as usual, and one of his wives was removing some grass mats that had lain upon the floor near the bed.

Alali, the son of joy, was no longer visible.

Having traveled from out of the romantic shadow of a blood-plum tree, through perils and pains to the inner chambers of the house of Masai, the eternal riddle of life had at last been explained to him by several inches of rather inferior steel.

XVI

ALTHOUGH Nettison was undoubtedly in possession of much useful and startling inside information on the Daraka case, and also fairly well acquainted with the unusual state of affairs on the Government beach at Oruna; though he was quite certain there was a decided connection between the two, and that one was simply a result of the other, he was still doing a great deal of guessing about the actual beginnings of these most interesting developments.

Bits of detached truths picked up in friendly native villages; snatches of trading beach gossip deliberately encouraged; hints that became facts when carefully trailed to their source; all these added to the train of innuendos and suspicions he had acquired at Oruna, plus the midnight call upon Delton of the A. P. A., had put him in a position to know more than Pellington wanted him to know, yet considerably less than Tarkman thought he did.

This was why neither Tarkman nor Nettison had very much to say to each other while they waited for nightfall in the dark little side creek above Daraka.

Oruna's D. C. did not want to talk to Nettison in any case. Virtually, he was

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under Nettison's orders, and he was making the best of an exceedingly bad job as silently as possible; and this, as he regarded the matter, was the only thing in the interests of decency, he could do.

And whatever else he may have thought of Nettison's unorthodox methods just then, he was grateful for the circumstance that Nettison was considerate enough to leave him alone and allow him to face the impending climax in his own way.

Nettison, on the other hand, preserved a discreet silence so that the D. C. might not realize how much guesswork he was indulging in, and how little of the whole truth he was actually familiar with, even though Delton and he had come to several fairly well-founded decisions on some angles of the case.

But he was aware of no such necessity for reserve as far as Pellington was concerned. He knew that Daraka's A. D. C. was considerably more in the dark about the Oruna end of the affair than he was; and as he waited patiently for nightfall he smiled occasionally when he visualized Pellington's expression as it probably would be on discovering Tarkman aboard the *Walrus*.

Perhaps such a denouement was not quite fair to Pellington who had every reason to believe that Tarkman, his immediate superior in the district, was then on his way to England.

But, unfortunately, Pellington was not being at all fair to himself or to the interests of good white government—which meant bad black results—so that his feelings were more or less deserving of a little scourging of one kind or another.

And if, as Nettison had reason to suspect, the Daraka money really were in the village of Oruna—

Pellington came aboard the *Walrus* from a canoe about seven in the evening. This, of itself, was secretive enough, and as it was then quite dark, without the trace of a moon, the A. D. C.'s willingness to come to terms with Nettison was obviously of an unofficial sort.

He climbed the rail and the tall, athletic shadow of him dropped noiselessly on deck into the uncertain light of a hurricane lantern that swung loosely in Nettison's left hand. But even this kind of illumination was evidently too much for Pellington's nerves.

"No lights!" he ordered sharply. "Put that —— thing out!"

Nettison held the lantern up in front of the A. D. C.'s face; so close that the latter pulled his head back with a frightened jerk.

"What the deuce—"

"Get down into the cabin," quietly.

"The ——!"

"Get down. I'll give all the orders that are necessary on this old boat."

Pellington stiffened and his hands clenched at his sides, but Nettison simply lowered the lamp and swung it suggestively in the general direction of the cabin companion. The A. D. C. hesitated, but finally obeyed, even as he muttered stubbornly—

"But, confound you, I don't want any lights."

"You're not being asked what you want," Nettison said quietly and followed. "And for a man as afraid of the light as you are, you talk too much."

Pellington winced and paled at this, but he had nothing to say, and, without further hesitation, descended into the *Walrus's* little cabin which was then shrouded in darkness deep and black enough to suit any one with a desire for secrecy.

It was not until Nettison, following with the lantern, lifted the shadows and discovered Tarkman seated at the forward end in a bulging-eyed expectancy, that Pellington was aware the cabin was already occupied.

He stopped as might a man who had walked in the dark to the edge of a pit, and, for a second or two, balanced himself on his toes precariously until he could throw his weight back, with a distinct thump, on his heels.

"The ——!" he whispered mechanically. "The—very ——!"

Then, oddly enough, he stood perfectly still, his arms dangling at his sides, his right shoulder curiously drooped, his head thrust forward, blinking at Tarkman with a ludicrous unbelief written all over his face.

"Hello, Pellington."

Tarkman's voice was so clear and sharp and so utterly unsuited to the situation, that Daraka's A. D. C. turned his eyes toward Nettison with an absurd look of inquiry.

"It's all right," Nettison assured him quietly. "Tarkman's on leave. And this is unofficial business."

Pellington smiled; and no one who knew him, particularly the ladies of his acquaintance, would have believed that he could

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possibly smile so stupidly. Just then, however, he felt rather sick. He knew there would be no sense of fighting or running or even swearing, and he did not want to swear. He wanted to sit down.

After several weeks of the most nerve-wracking worry and sleeplessness, Pellington suddenly felt very tired. He knew when the game was played out. There was no life in his knees, and if he could only sit down for a minute or two—

"Sit down," Nettison invited simply. "And let's talk it over. We've got lots of time."

Pellington nodded and sat down on Tarkman's left. He did not seem to observe that Nettison remained standing, resting the lantern on the little cabin table. Nor did he at once give any heed to Tarkman, his superior. The whole business, to him, had become as cold as a dead fish, and the one coherent thought he had—and even it was rather vague—was that it probably served him right for ever allowing himself to play the fool with another man's wife.

NOT that he had any intention to blame the woman or even mention her name if he could help it. Her part in the affair was, of course, simply a coincidence. Pellington was sure of this; and he could readily understand, under the circumstances, why she had never come forward with any evidence that might have led to the detection of those who had drugged him and taken the money.

Evidently she had escaped from the queer jumble at Daraka that awful night without injury and had apparently managed to return to Oruna without arousing even a whisper of suspicion against herself; and he was confoundedly glad of this.

Of course, she was an unusually clever woman and might readily be expected to take care of herself in almost any situation—

"Tarkman and I are agreed," Nettison began simply, and his voice as far as Daraka's A. D. C. was concerned, came from a great distance, "that the money is in the Oruna village somewhere."

"Yes?" Pellington questioned lifelessly, and did not observe how silly Tarkman looked at being so casually informed of the possible whereabouts of the missing cash.

"We know," Nettison went on for the benefit of both his guests, "that Tola was in Daraka that night. And we also know that you had an after-dinner guest—"

"That's a lie! I was—"

"An after-dinner guest who shall be nameless," Nettison proceeded quietly. "Time, Pellington, has a trick of naming names at the most fitting moment, so I guess we can leave that little detail to the clock. Any way, Tola was there—in Daraka—and if he didn't take the money, I'll make an apology to his departed shade."

Tarkman coughed to clear his throat, but asked in a voice that was hard and hoarse for all that:

"What do you propose to do?"

"Go to Oruna and call on Masai."

"What for? You don't suppose he'll tell you where the money is, even if he knows?"

Nettison laughed shortly.

"No. I guess not. Or you'd have gone after it yourself some time ago."

As Pellington's interest suddenly livened up, Tarkman's just as suddenly faded out. He glanced quickly down at his boots as Pellington muttered thickly and in unbelief—

"You've known all along!"

"Suspected," Tarkman growled without looking up. "Can't act hastily on mere suspicion." Then, with characteristically sudden sharpness— "Don't be a —— fool! This is ticklish work. Keep your head and shut up."

Pellington's expression, after this, was not happy. The flickering light of the hurricane lantern played upon his drawn, white face as though determined to lay bare his very soul; and, every now and then, he would pull his head up with a jerk as if to escape from the probing fingers of the light.

Altogether, as Nettison was well aware, it was a nasty business—slimy and muddy—in which several normal human fools had become immersed to their chins and were now beginning to taste the poisonous bitterness of it.

Yet, though Nettison had always disliked mud of any kind, he did not, in this case particularly, feel compelled to moralize. The earth was not the habitat of gods but of just such simple, two-legged animals who, for the greater part, lived within the boundary lines that were designated upon a map, worshipped and made laws according to their fashion, gave their breed a name

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and completed the conceit by proclaiming themselves a nation. And then straightway proceeded, in spite of the disguise, to resume the more natural business of being rather more simple and stupid and human than ever.

Presently, after studying both Tarkman and Pellington speculatively for a moment or two, he said pacifically:

"No need to squabble over details. What we're after is the money and I think we can get it if we go after it right. But, as old Ben Franklin said, if we don't hang together, we'll probably hang separately."

"But why are you nosing in?" Pellington demanded suddenly, as if something of his normal self had come back to him. "You're only a—a confounded hawker—a peddler! What the —— business is it of yours?"

Nettison laughed. He was not unaccustomed to the designation particularly from out of the mouths of assistant district commissioners or third class "residents" who had not yet recovered from the thrill of ordering uniformed Hausa to fetch and carry for them.

But Tarkman did not laugh. His bulging eyes bulged out so much farther and he came to his feet so slowly and deliberately that Nettison was more interested in watching him than he was in thinking of rebuking Pellington.

In the dim light Tarkman seemed to swell to abnormal proportions. And when he spoke, the manner in which his large white teeth bit off each word, gave Pellington no opportunity to misunderstand.

"Nettison is my guest as long as he is in the Oruna district. Tonight I am using his launch because it pleases me to do so, and you are going wherever he wants you to go because I will go along to see that you do. Is that clear?"

Pellington nodded stiffly.

"Perfectly."

"Very well. Enough of this tomfoolery. When do we start, Nettison?"

"Now, I guess. We have one stop to make before we head for Masai's."

"What stop?" suspiciously.

"Delton's."

"Delton's!"

"Yes." Nettison smiled. "Delton'll tell us whether tonight's the night."

And about two hours later, on the A. P. A. gig-wharf at Oruna, Delton did tell them.

And it was.

XVII

BETWEEN ten-thirty and eleven o'clock, a small canoe dawdled unobtrusively up to the mangrove-stick breakwater that, on little Oruna Creek, served the village of Oruna as a landing stage. In the canoe were two canoe-boys and a woman.

The canoe-boys, after the manner of most of their kind, wore loin cloths, and the woman, following the prevailing fashion among native women, wore a silk handkerchief about her head and an overcloth that hung in a loose straight line from her armpits to her ankles.

It was too dark to distinguish colors, and the woman, when she had silently leaped ashore, did not pause long enough to give any casual bystander the opportunity to inquire into her conception of an appropriate color scheme.

With a low monosyllabic word to the canoe-boys, she slipped soundlessly away from the breakwater and was quickly lost beyond the ragged tangle of mud and thatch huts that constituted the outskirts of the village.

Evidently she had in mind a destination that was not unknown to her. And as she glided with uncanny sureness of foot through the dark and devious alleys that passed for streets in this stronghold of Masai, she was apparently determined to reach that destination with as little delay as possible.

For the greater part, the village was asleep; or as nearly so as any Delta village ever is. Here and there an infant whimpered and a mother crooned, and occasionally the grunting of restless livestock vied with the human animals that breathed stertorously as they slept.

But the woman gave no heed to any of this, and presently she passed noiselessly into Masai's compound and—unlike Alali the canoe-boy—without any hesitation into the house of Masai.

There was no whispered announcement of her arrival, and no sign of a lamp to light her way.

If any of Masai's wives were on the premises, they did not make their appearance. The woman passed into Masai's house as if she had a right to do so, and except for the fact that she was careful at all times to walk where the shadows were

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deepest, and that her right hand had slipped under the folds of her overcloth in the vicinity of the waistline, there was nothing unusually suspicious in anything she did. At least, not until she reached the room in which Masai, himself, sat in all his orange-blazered majesty at a low-built deal table that had been made for him by an Accra carpenter.

There was a small kerosene lamp upon this table, and it was turned rather low as if Masai had a desire to be economical with kerosene. Yet, though he was obviously expecting a visitor—and a visitor of no little importance, considering his attire—the low sound of her voice, just beyond the mat-covered doorway of the room, induced the chief to turn the lamp-wick lower still.

Then, the woman being satisfied apparently, that the light was dim enough, the mat over the door was seen to bulge inward very slightly. For a second or two perhaps, there was a fleeting glimpse of a Copenhagen-blue silk handkerchief about the woman's head, and a brief flash of the yellow and red hues of her Madras overcloth; and then she had slipped along the wall into the darkest corner of the room, where she immediately made herself still less visible by squatting native fashion on the floor.

Masai, except to dim the light, had barely stirred. When the woman had passed him, even his eyes did not follow to see where she was going to sit. He kept his attention fixed upon the solitary mat-covered window that looked out upon the compound and his interest in his mysterious visitor's existence seemed to be of a patient kind that might possibly be respectful, but was not likely to be subservient or obedient.

He knew the woman, by night, as the Red Cat. By day she was known as Mrs. Armsley.

And though Masai did not particularly enjoy his acquaintance with either personality, he liked the Red Cat the lesser of the two. As Mrs. Armsley, she was the wife of the doctor on the Government beach; white and distant and, as far as Masai was concerned, harmless.

But as the Red Cat, she was the wife of no man, was neither white nor black, and was, frequently, much too near and too dangerous to be ignored.

The chief, embattled in his fat, and sure of his power in the district of Oruna, had been at some pains on several occasions, to convince himself that he was not afraid of her. But the Red Cat knew better than this.

Tola, who had been, from the Red Cat's point of view, a simple but extremely useful kind of fool, had died on the A. P. A. beach because he had, upon an ill-tempered impulse, presumed too much upon the protection he thought Mrs. Armsley, plus the Red Cat, could and would afford him.

As on other less culpable occasions, Tola had fondly believed, and with sufficient reason, too, that Tarkman would be loth to set the due processes of law in motion against him had he actually succeeded in his sudden, ill-tempered desire to wreak death upon Nettison in exchange for a "so-so li'l bit kick."

However, where Tola had erred had been principally in the matter of discretion. Niger Nettison had been the wrong kind of white man to try to kill with or without the law's protection.

However, neither Mrs. Armsley, who was the wife of a white man who drank green drinks, nor the Red Cat, who was no man's wife, had dreamed that Alali, the son of joy, would not come back to her out of the house of Masai. And Alali, as she had been well aware, was the kind of messenger who surely would have come back to her had enough of him been left free and alive to do so.

Therefore, it was clear that Masai had his impulsive moments just like other lesser and leaner people; that anger, born of a fear that must have been sudden and sharp, had impelled him to defy the Red Cat by preventing the return of her messenger.

So that there were now two matters to be discussed between them instead of one; two matters of greater import possibly than any others in the life of man; a matter of money and a matter of blood. And both, the Red Cat was afraid, would require to be settled before the sun came up again.

Thus, during a silence that lasted several minutes, this woman who chose to love the dark in her own queer fashion, squatted in her shadow-black corner and watched Masai think.

Evidently he was in no hurry to discuss the subject of the money she had told him he would find buried in Tola's hut.

Her messenger on that occasion had returned to her and she had known that Masai had accepted the information with

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thanks. Since then, however, he had apparently come to the conclusion that it would be inadvisable to lend himself to her unusual and precarious notions of excitement as Tola had done, and that he would be glad if her association with the village of Oruna came to an end.

MORE than this, she knew as she watched Masai, that it had come to an end. The word finis had been written by a bullet that had come from Niger Nettison's gun.

All because of this bullet, Tola was dead. Tarkman, respectable to the last, had gone home to Garhampton to enjoy the sanctified atmosphere of respectability she hated him for. Armsley was laughing soundlessly at her while he sipped his green drinks, knowing, as she knew, that she was going to cut and run before he did.

Pellington of Daraka was writing her—in her rôle of Mrs. Armsley, which was the only one he knew about—young and sloppy and dangerous letters, that were becoming sloppier and more dangerous all the while; and in the latest of these, he had warned her that Nettison was becoming too suspicious and active for comfort, but that she could, as ever, depend upon him, Pellington, to keep his mouth shut as far as she was concerned.

And Masai, who had the money from Pellington's looted safe somewhere on the premises, was sitting in fat and oily silence, telling her, without so much as a grunt, that the district of Oruna could no longer be regarded as a hunting-ground.

Naturally, neither Mrs. Armsley nor the Red Cat liked any of this. And when her odd nocturnal personality had concentrated its attention on Masai's creased bull-neck during several more minutes of expressively wordless quiet, she decided that, even if she did think she was going to need the Daraka money, Alali's debt of blood was the more important matter of the two.

So her right hand remained within the folds of her overcloth, and presently she said in Masai's own gutteral tongue:

"The Red Cat spoke to Masai by the mouth of Alali the canoe-boy. But Alali did not return from the house of Masai. Is Alali like the smoke from the fire that is seen one moment and the next is gone, no man knows whither?"

Masai's huge bulk gave no visible evidence that he had heard. He had been thinking it might not be a bad idea to have the Red Cat secure Pellington's gun so that Nettison could be killed with it; and perhaps the woman, since Tola had been her especial ally, would like to do the shooting herself. This arrangement would undoubtedly save Masai a great deal of trouble; and, of course, he had no intention of answering the Red Cat's questions in any case. Then he heard her say softly but most unpleasantly:

"The fat of Masai is like the fat of many pigs. Where is Alali the canoe-boy and the white man's money that came out of Daraka?"

Masai's little eyes blinked at the dimmed light of the lamp, and his ears, small and flat against his head, felt much larger than usual. They were so full of the sound of a woman's voice likening him to the fat of many pigs. Yet he did not turn his face in her direction. After all, the tongue of a woman—

"Where is Alali, the messenger of the Red Cat? And where is the white man's money that came out of Daraka? Does the fat of Masai fill his pig's ears so full that he does not hear?"

A sound not at all unlike the squeal of a pig was the answer to this, and the woman now had the satisfaction of receiving the chief's direct attention. So she laughed, low and sneeringly, and every ripple of that laughter stabbed at Masai's thick hide like the point of a knife.

"When the blood of Masai is spilled upon the ground," the woman went on tauntingly, "Alali the canoe-boy will drink of it in spirit land and the soul of him will grow fat as the soul of Masai will become lean and dry as a rotten stick. For the Red Cat spoke to Masai by the tongue of Alali, and Masai—squat, fat, swine! Your life is but a very little thing—like a grain of dust in the hollow of my hand!"

Masai, struggling to get out of his chair, sat down again. The whites of his eyes, rarely visible, had suddenly become very prominent. For the Red Cat was on her feet, crouching from her corner with puma-like stealth and fury; and there was but little of Mrs. Armsley in the woman who came, step by step, into the dimmed light of the little kerosene lamp.

The bright blue silk handkerchief about her head and the splashing reds and yellows

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in her overcloth struck a barbaric note that screamed but did not by any means offend. Even her dull bronze-red hair, glinting above the silken folds of the handkerchief, glowed with an unaccustomed fire.

Her normally sallow skin, free of all trace of cosmetics, looked more sallow than it had ever done in daylight; and the slumbrous light on her deep black eyes was now a yellow flame that leaped in a passion that made Masai's three hundred odd pounds become colder and colder with every passing second.

The chief of Oruna saw no beauty in the picture the woman made. He was accustomed to the passionate raging of his own womenkind, and in his younger days he had been partial to a little fire.

But this was different; because it was the unbelievable, suddenly and paralizingly, come true. It was death stalking toward him brazenly in his own house!

In the woman's slender, tapering right hand was a small, flat looking white man's gun; a very little gun, it seemed to Masai, but yet a gun that would kill just as effectively as a much bigger one. Masai knew this, and the shiny, oily blackness of his face became as the color of dirty, wet ashes—but dry.

There was no moisture in the chief's mouth either. His throat in a few, appallingly brief seconds, had become as incapable of articulation as a long-necked calabash lying neglected in the noonday sun. His huge legs and arms had the palsy of fear in them and he was totally unconscious of the existence of either hands or feet.

No, there was no beauty in death or its appointed agent. He had seen many men die and he had assisted not a few of them in the process, but he had never been privileged to look into the Great Dark on his own account.

He was only vaguely aware of the Red Cat's sallow face, that became paler and paler as her eyes flared more and more yellow. His attention had become too firmly centered upon the gaping mouth of the automatic in her right hand; and the mouth of the automatic, from Masai's point of view, did gape, wider and wider every instant.

Then, as the gun came nearer and nearer, there came suddenly out of its gaping mouth, as it seemed, a far-off voice speaking strangely in a tongue that was but vaguely familiar:

"The ——! The very ——! It's Mrs. Armsley!"

"Sh! You —— fool—"

A snarl of feline rage—as hellish a sound as Pellington had ever heard or ever hoped to hear again—was punctured by a spit of fire from the mouth of the automatic; then another and another.

Masai, however, saw only the first of them. And, the thunder of sound that followed, including the tinkling of broken glass as the lamp was smashed, did not reach his ears. For the first of the Red Cat's bullets had paid Alali's debt of blood before the second had put out the light.

The third?

Tarkman and Pellington, crouching in their stockinged feet outside the mat-covered window of the room, heard the third bullet tear through the mat and whine savagely between them as the woman leaped with uncanny sureness of direction straight for the doorway.

And Nettison, who was waiting for her there and who had seen Masai die, politely and most carefully stepped aside to allow the lady to pass!

This time, he felt sure, she had gone back to her kind for good.

XVIII

THE story really ended there. More than this there was no explanation; nothing, at least, in the nature of a confession from any one.

As Nettison had, from innuendo to innuendo, reached a point where investigation and bluff and guesswork had enabled him to piece together a fair version of the truth, the balance of the story came to him in like fashion.

The immediately resultant pandemonium in the village of Oruna was simply pandemonium which ultimately died down to a sobbing groan, particularly after the Daraka money had been found under the late chief's bed.

There was action of a kind for a few excited minutes—knives and machetes against bullets and the awful authority that was behind the gun—but it was of an anti-climactic character that added nothing to this short history.

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There was no trace of the Red Cat, and Nettison, who alone knew the direction she had taken, did not try to find any. But when the *Walrus* had finally reached the Oruna Government beach, and the all-important money had been lodged in the safe, the next step, of course, was the Armsley bungalow.

"I don't think I'll go along," Pellington announced feebly, thus making the first coherent remark he had made since his involuntary exclamation had produced the climax. There was a look in his eyes that gaped, and it would probably be several weeks or even months before he quite got over it. For, even he had a fair inkling of the whole truth now.

Tarkman did not insist upon Pellington's company to the Armsley bungalow, but he did not have any qualms about visiting the bungalow himself. In fact, he appeared to be rather eager to do so. Unlike Pellington, he had done a great deal of talking; staccato conversation that meant nothing at all, and which added not a syllable to the sum of Nettison's information.

Dr. Armsley was in the living-room when they reached the bungalow, and he laid a book face down on the table when Tarkman, who entered first, stepped into the room.

"It's finished, Frank," Tarkman said with absurd abruptness and brevity. "She—"

"Not dead?"

Armsley's eyebrows lifted in genuine surprize. Evidently he had had more faith in Mrs. Armsley's ability than to think she could possibly have allowed herself to be killed.

"No. Gone. And she can't come back this time."

Armsley glanced at Nettison then back at Tarkman.

"Why not?"

"Well—you see—we've just come from Masai's place. And she was there. And the Daraka money, too."

"Yes?" quietly and patiently.

"And for some reason or other she lost her head and—that is, you see, old man, she killed Masai. Don't you see? Shot him. Masai. And—" showing his large teeth in a pathetic grin—"of course, she can't come back to you or to Oruna after that."

Armsley pursed his lips thoughtfully and his eyes widened just a little, giving Nettison a brief momentary hint of something akin to triumph and relief.

"Masai—eh?" The doctor's smile was slow and whimsical. "Let's offer her a vote of thanks. Hello, Nettison. How's the arm?"

And this—plus the fact that the Red Cat did not return to resume the rôle of Mrs. Armsley, and passed out of the further annals of Oruna altogether—was the sum total of the doctor's contribution to the explanation.

What Armsley did with Pellington's letters to Mrs. Armsley—and the letters of other men elsewhere—Pellington never knew.

TARKMAN invited Nettison up to his rooms after they had left the Armsley bungalow, and from Tarkman's veranda they could see Pellington's straight, athletic figure down at the wharf-end. Evidently Daraka's A. D. C. was not satisfied as yet that Mrs. Armsley would not come back.

"What are you going to do about him," Nettison asked, jerking his head in the direction of the wharf, when Tarkman had nervously ordered drinks.

"Er—why—nothing. Nothing to be done. It's finished. We have the money, you know."

Nettison smiled wryly and studied Pellington's dim silhouette for a minute or so. He knew Pellington had, in actual fact, been more culpable than Tarkman, but he was not at all sure that Tarkman's conception of ethics was half as good as those of the younger man.

"Finished—eh? Simply because she's gone, and the money's in the safe?"

"Why—why not?"

"You knew where the money was—who had taken it—weeks ago. Why didn't you go after it?"

"Good lord, man! She was Armsley's wife and—and there was nothing sure about it. We simply had to be careful not to—"

"You mean *you* had to be careful. Why?"

"Because we couldn't—"

"*You* couldn't. You're the D. C., you know. Why did you have to be so careful?"

Tarkman grinned. It was the same grin he had been guilty of when Tola had died; utterly without mirth. His eyes bulged,

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too, in the same frightened kind of way, and it was at least a minute before he said a little thickly:

"You're wrong, Nettison. Quite wrong. There was nothing between Mrs. Armsley and me. Nothing. I met her on the *Nigeria* coming out this tour and because we were both coming to Oruna, we became friendly. I didn't know her then—had never met her before—had never heard that—oh, well, you know what I mean. You saw her to-night."

Nettison nodded and waited for Tarkman to continue, which he ultimately did in his nervous, jerky fashion.

"You're wrong, old man. About us. Perhaps I paid her—er—little compliments. At first. And told her about my forthcoming marriage and showed her photographs. The usual thing. But nothing more. No. And she came to dislike me—to hate me, Nettison, because I was the son of a bishop!"

"Why?"

Tarkman shivered a little.

"She hated what she called Christian smugness and respectability, and my father's picture—you've seen it—she said the nastiest things about the poor old chap. Particularly after—after—"

Tarkman paused, then went on again from another angle.

"You know, Nettison, you're on the ground and you can see how things really are, but this girl I am going to marry, what does she know about the kind of life we lead out here? Its seamy rottenness, its filth, its—er—perfectly frank immorality in lots of cases? Nothing. She's in Garhampton. I'm thirty-five hundred miles away. Letters take three weeks each way. Mrs. Armsley knew this. And—" slowing up expressively— "so did I."

"All right," quietly. "But what has that to do with the Daraka money?"

Tarkman moistened his lips and glanced rather furtively down at the wharf where Pellington still held lonely vigil.

"You said Pellington was young and a fool. Perhaps he was. I don't know. I can't judge any man where she was concerned."

"No?"

"No. Take—take my own case. She hated me for my antecedents, and because she couldn't involve me in the—er—the mud, she came up to my rooms one night. Late. She was dressed just as you saw her to-night. Just as if she were one of the ordinary native women who do that sort of thing. And when, after quite a scene, I was trying to get her to leave, Tola showed up." Tarkman grinned again. "It was really very simple."

Nettison had no difficulty in understanding how simple it had been.

"At first I was afraid Tola would tell Armsley," Tarkman continued and his voice was becoming husky. "And, of course, I didn't want Armsley to think I was a rotter, or that his wife went in for that kind of intrigue."

Tarkman laughed shortly at the pathetic humor of his consideration for Armsley.

"That was the beginning. I worried. Dreadfully. Couldn't sleep. And almost everywhere I went after that, Tola was always somewhere around, scribbling on pieces of paper just to show me that he could write to Armsley or the girl at home or any one at all Mrs. Armsley happened to think about. And she thought of everybody that mattered."

"Mental suggestion?"

"Just so. Day by day. Everywhere. This climate's bad enough of itself, and if a man can't sleep—well, my nerves began to jump and finally Armsley began to notice that there was something wrong between his wife and myself. And one night he and I had a talk. But that was all it was. Just talk. We couldn't do anything to stop it."

"Couldn't he send his wife home?"

Tarkman shook his head.

"She had been to England just once and she hated it. The only home I ever heard her speak of was Las Palmas where Armsley married her. And she wasn't the kind of woman to be ordered out if she did not want to go. She'd have taken to the bush and Tola was still alive, you know, and I couldn't put the son of Masai in jail simply for scribbling on bits of paper when I could see him do it."

Nettison's brows furrowed. He was beginning to see very clearly why Tarkman had been so relieved when Tola had been shot. In fact, Tola's presence on the A. P. A. beach, while Tarkman had been visiting Delton, had been just an instance of how persistently he had followed the D. C. wherever he went.

"Did he ever actually write a letter?" Nettison asked still frowning.

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"No. But I never knew when he would. And in six weeks—before I could hear about it from Garhampton—he could have written half a dozen of them. Don't you see? It wouldn't have hit me first. Just the girl. One letter after another for six weeks before I'd know anything about it. And she's too —— decent to be hurt like that by—by—"

Tarkman did not finish it, and his glance once more shifted to the wharf; this time with just a hint of antagonism.

"And that's why I could not act too hastily in the Daraka case. I had to be sure. Quite sure. Both Armsley and I suspected Mrs. Armsley had been down at Pellington's place that night, but Pellington would not give her away. And I could not afford to hit at Tola and Armsley's wife in a case of that kind—and miss. You—er—you can see that now, can't you?"

Nettison was afraid he could, and he was glad, however unethical Tarkman might have been, that he had not been thinking of himself. But, about half an hour later, when he had shaken Tarkman's hand and turned the *Walrus's* nose down river in the direction of the A. P. A. beach, he hoped Delton's conversation, if he had any to offer, would help him to get the muddy taste out of his mouth.

DELTON, who evidently expected his visitor, sat at his desk in massive silence while Nettison related the complete story of the night, and for several minutes thereafter the trading-agent nodded solemnly over the climax as if he were trying to convince himself that the thing had ended about as well as might be expected.

"I suppose, somehow or other, she'll manage to find her way home," he commented at last and seemed to have a kind of fatherly concern in the matter in spite of the fact that he had made it his business to see that Mrs. Armsley's departure from the Government beach that evening had been made under the watchful supervision of two of his Kroo-boys. This, so that Nettison might be told about it.

"Las Palmas?" Nettison suggested, referring to Mrs. Armsley's home—the only one Tarkman had ever heard her speak about.

Delton did not answer directly. But when he had thought a little while, he said with a note of conviction:

"You know, that woman sowed a lot of trouble in the Government service. She had a trick of bowling them over wherever she went, and most of 'em resigned or got themselves transferred afterward. And when she took it into her head to hate a man, she surely made a good job of it. Still—" the cloudy look in Delton's eyes lifted—"there must have been some good in her somewhere or she'd never have had sand enough to do for Masai right in his own bailiwick. What do you think?"

"Something in that," shortly. "But her principal trouble was petticoats, shoes and stockings. If you don't belong, you don't belong, that's all. Particularly if you hated things as she hated the whole kit and boodle of us."

"But her education!"

"Education!"

Nettison laughed most expressively. But Delton who had quite recently been at some trouble to point out to Doctor Armsley his duty to society as far as Mrs. Armsley was concerned, was just as anxious that Nettison should not leave Oruna with any misconception of his view of the beginnings of the thing.

"Wait a minute. Don't be so —— quick to sneer at education. You didn't see her standing in the smoking-room companion of the *Kadana*, seven or eight years ago, watching Armsley drink green drinks. But I did. You didn't see her playing governess to some French youngsters in Las Palmas, just before Armsley caught up with her and married her. But I happened to see that, too. And I've never blamed Armsley for being fooled; or Tarkman either, for that matter, and she didn't happen to him until she'd been under the influence of these swamps for about seven years. No, my son. Education isn't ironclad, but it's a —— good veneer."

Nettison grimaced.

"We're not arguing; just agreeing. She got away with it until she came to live out here."

"Right. And, at that, there aren't a dozen people in the world who really do know the truth. I didn't even guess it until about two years ago at Sapeli."

"And Armsley? How long do you think he's known?"

Delton shook his head, paused a little while, then laughed shortly in a sardonic fashion that was altogether foreign to him.

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"Life's a queer business. Funny, if you like. Armsley really liked green drinks when his liking for them attracted her attention to him on board the *Kadana*. But he's hated 'em now for a long time. And now that she's gone, I'll wager you'll never see him drink another."

"But why did he have to go on drinking them after—"

"Just as a part of the business of taking his medicine," Delton interrupted dryly. "He's a queer customer anyway."

There was a long, reflective silence after this. Then Delton, his eyes clouding with doubt again, rose and walked out to the veranda. Nettison followed, and for several minutes they looked down upon the black face of the sluggish-flowing Oruna, and into the moonless dark of the mangrove-bound swamps that stretched like a dank and somber blanket from Benin to Old Calabar.

"She'll head north, I guess," Nettison suggested, knowing what was on Delton's mind.

"Kano and maybe Tripoli," Delton agreed gloomily. "She'd be all right there. Fine. But that's a —— of a long way from here—even for a man."

And Delton, who was the father of a family, and who had not been privileged to look upon the death of Masai, went to bed to lie awake worrying about a woman who was almost white and such a long way from home.

NETTISON departed from Oruna next morning after early breakfast. There was still the taste of mud in his mouth. But, to him, the truth about Mrs. Armsley, in its elemental features at least, meant nothing that was particularly new. That it had been true at all, in her case, was the thing that had staggered him, and provided him with something approximating a realized expectation.

For the rest—the things that Mrs. Armsley had done; the results of her vicious hatreds toward "her father's people," and particularly hatred for those who represented law and order and respectability; her gradual backsliding into ways that were hidden and dark, and her final plunge in the general direction of her motherland—wherever in Africa this might be; none of this was in the least inexplicable to Nettison.

He knew that a woman, of whatever race or creed or color, was more susceptible to the influences of geography than a man. And he knew also that white men who, knowingly or unknowingly, had taken unto themselves wives of Mrs. Armsley's sort, and subjected them to the geographic influences of the Lower Niger and thereabout; these men had not been strangers to experiences similar to Armsley's.

Sooner or later the processes of drifting backward had begun, and neither education nor the occasional contact with the civilization of the cities had long deadened the sound of the alluring whispers of the bush.

Sometimes, because of social difficulties, the white men whose names they bore, drifted down the narrow bush trail into the blackness of forgetfulness with them; and in any event few, if any, of these white men had been Armsleys.

Thus, the story of Mrs. Armsley was not a new one. And that her feet, small and naked as those of any native woman, should, even then, be scuffing lightly along a bush path into the nethermost deeps of oblivion, was just the final paragraph to a chapter of life that, according to Delton, had begun to be written in the doorway of the S. S. *Kadana's* smoking-room.

For it was then she had chosen to withhold the whole truth from the man who, in addition to having a weakness for green drinks, held a medical officer's billet on the Lower Niger.

So it was from that moment, in the footsteps of a lie, that she had all unwittingly turned her feet bushward. And in their own way, in their own time, the whispering of the mangroves had called her home.

Perhaps there was a kind of poetic justice in all this. But Nettison did not presume to come to any decisions about it. To him it was just a story that had been written, after the true manner of the West Coast of Africa, without excuses or apologies, and with as little explanation as possible.

However, he did decide, as the *Walrus* buried her nose into the north, that the next time he was compelled to hire a canoe, he would make a point of calling upon his friends by way of the gig-wharf where the water was always comfortably deep, and leave the approach to the muddy breakwater to those who liked that kind of thing.

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THE MASSACRE AT SAN FERNANDEZ

by Arthur Woodward

CHARLES BENT, elder brother of William Bent, famous in frontier history as the owner of Bent's Fort on the Arkansas, was appointed Governor of the Territory of New Mexico by the following proclamation, printed in Spanish:

Notice

Finding myself duly authorized by the President of the United States, for the time being, I make the following appointments to the offices of Government for New Mexico, Territory of the United States:

Charles Bent will be Governor.

Donanciano Vigil will be Secretary of the Territory.

Richard Dallum will be Chief Sheriff—Constable.

Francis P. Blair will be Attorney General.

Charles Blummer will be Treasurer.

Eugene Lertsendorfer will be Administrator of Public Accounts.

Joab Houghton, Antonio Jose Otero, and Charles Beaubien will be Justices of the Supreme Court and each in his district will be a Circuit Judge.

Given under my hand in Santa Fé, capitol of the Territory of New Mexico, this twenty-second day of September, 1846, and the seventy-first year of the independence of the United States.

—S. W. KEARNY, Brigadier General of the United States Army.

Thus was Charles Bent made Governor, notwithstanding the ominous mutterings and rumblings of discontent that emanated from the Mexicans who had been friends of the cowardly braggart, General Manuel Armijo, former Governor of New Mexico.

Plots to overthrow the American rule were brewing before the end of the year 1846. Luckily, one of these, fomented by Don Tomas Ortiz, a resident of Santa Fé, was discovered in time and prevented a general uprising of both the Mexicans and their allies, the Pueblo Indians, whom the Mexicans had won over to their side with lies about the Americans and promises of great rewards. Two agents were arrested at the San Domingo Pueblo where they had succeeded in organizing a body of three hundred Indians. However a parade of the troops in the plaza at Santa Fé and a threat to level the Pueblos with artillery unless they agreed to be peaceable quieted the inhabitants for a time.

In January, 1847, Governor Bent was visiting friends at the little village of San Fernandez, then the county seat of the district of Taos.

Early on the morning of January 19, 1847, the storm that had been brewing among the Mexican *juntas*—societies of a revolutionary nature—broke full force on the Americans who were in Fernandez. Governor Bent was surprized with his wife and children in his home. The door was barricaded in time but the Indians and Mexicans easily broke a hole through the flat adobe roof and jumped on him from above. Badly wounded about the head, he strove to beat off his assailants but was finally shot down in front of his horrified family.

It is related that his courageous wife handed him his firearms as the murderers were breaking in, urging him to shoot, but he refrained from doing so for fear that if he resisted his family would also perish. As he fell, an Indian, said by some to be one "Big Nigger," a Delaware who had married a Taos woman, and was one of the leaders of the attack against the Americans, tore off his scalp, and the bloody trophy was later paraded in high glee through the streets of San Fernandez.

The insurgents were speedily punished by Captain Burgwin and a force of United States dragoons in a bloody skirmish at La Canada, a rough high-walled cañon, filled with broken sandstone slabs and lava, a half-hour ride from Embuda, New Mexico, in the latter part of January, 1847.

The Delaware Indian, Big Nigger, who had led the mob at San Fernandez, later escaped from the Pueblo de Taos when it was attacked by the American troops and made his way into the mountains of the upper Arkansas where he went into hiding along with Jim Dicky, Little Beaver and Jim Swannick, three other Delaware hunters. A price was placed on his head but, as far as can be learned, no one ever collected the bounty.

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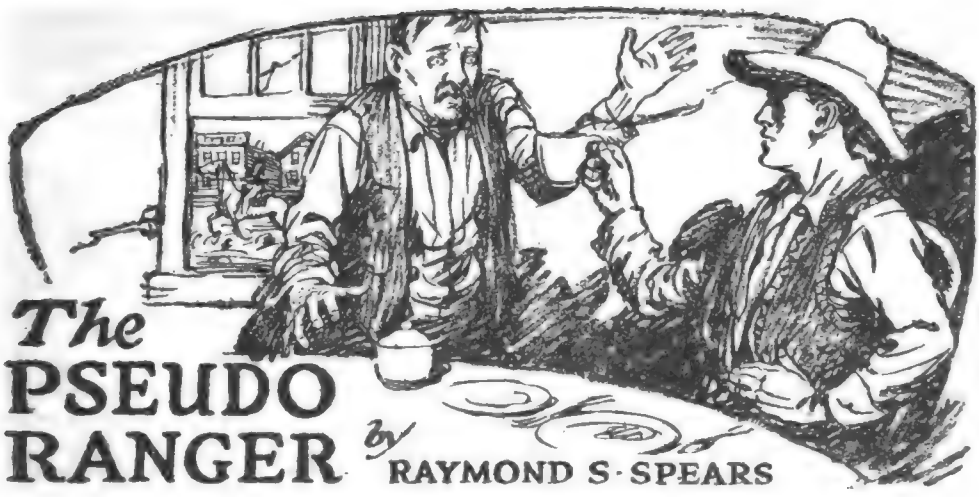

The PSEUDO RANGER

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

Author of "Fines and Fees," "Willie alias Bill," etc.

"TIP" MELLON was a peaceable lad in the Red Claybank country. His mother was a widow, left because one of the Hatton gang shot her husband on a timber-snatching day in the pines. Tip, harking back, could just remember the funeral, how deadly quiet and hot that summer day had been. Then followed years on years of toil, of corn and bacon, of berries eking out the worm-eaten vegetables and of traps set for wild meats and a few furs.

School kept three months or so in the winter out there in the wilds of the southern Ozarks. Tip went, sitting at his books with his eyes eating into the words, learning them, while around him throbbed the antagonisms, the hatreds, the suspicions which many young chaps had inherited from their nerve-wracked, hard-pressed and even desperate parents.

Hattons were there, seven or eight of the killing brood. They watched Tip Mellon to discover the sign of his awakening to the memory of the bushwhack when Rank Hatton let go the fourteen slugs which wilted the young manhood of a good worker, who hated moonshine, believed in honest labor, and who had cleaned seven of the scoundrels with a wagon spoke in a fair fight on the day they tried to bluff him into voting for a mean sheriff and a trickster county clerk. The slugs hit the brave man in the back, of course.

Would Tip Mellon remember? Would he seek revenge? No one knew. The widow said nothing outside. Minding her own business, she kept her son studying. He slicked out of schoolboy fights, no one ever succeeded in cornering him into a rocking, clubbing or fisticuff. He seemed timid. His mother, trembling for him, urged him never to stand up to any one. Instead, she pleaded with him to keep out of trouble, to edge around the rough going of bad feelings and the tormentings when boys plague boys.

Tip grew up strong, shooting erect and fine. He was right handy with an ax and chain dog, and when riding for cattle drovers in the pines, picking feeders up for the buyers, Tip was right smart and good. He handled a rope so cleverly that a drover from over in Oklahoma took him on. Mrs. Mellon, her voice shaking with gratitude, begged her son to go. The old Hatton crowd, the youngsters growing up, were rough and mean, bad as their parents had been. As children, their tauntings, plaguings and running together meant nothing much. Nobody would mind a widow's son while he was a boy. But when a father has killed a neighbor, then the son of the murderer itches to follow up the meanness in the next generation.

Tip Mellon rode away with four hundred head of the shrunken pine country cattle. He rode well, proved a good road herder, and emerged into the big pasture country where the Saw-Horse outfit was a lively crowd to work with. They were a pretty wild bunch of cowboys, with two of bad

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Indian blood and a scouter among them. They could ride anything, played rough as they worked and tried to lay a welt or two on Tip Mellon who slipped from under.

The horse-play didn't quite connect up with the boy. He evaded the thousand things cowboys know how to do when they think it is fun to make somebody uncomfortable, try to ride a weaker man, or look for trouble with somebody they think they can whip.

The boss was a tempery old boy who liked the pine country kid. He called any one he saw trying to abuse the youngster. That of course made it a bit worse for Tip when the riders had him out alone. They slicked his saddle, trimmed the tail of his pet horse, and tried to work burrs into his shirt. But a boy who had been tormented all his life by Red Clay country kids didn't have much new to learn, and when "Two Blade," one of the breeds, playfully sought to throw Tip under the hoofs of a racing bunch of cattle, the boy went down, but up so quickly that he rode clear.

Two Blade was less fortunate. He had crowded the boy, tangling the lad's whirling rope to throw him. In going down, the boy greased under, and Two Blade's horse was tripped, the breed thrown headlong, and when the doctors were through with him he made a pretty poor wagon cook, having been cut to pieces as he had intended the boy should be.

Two Blade had friends. The game of trying to cripple the youngster was no longer playful. They wanted to kill him for escaping the fate prepared for him, leaving the scoundrel to take the bitter medicine. The boss saw how matters were. The lad couldn't hold his own against the crowd. The only thing to do was let him go before they gave him the raw deal which is such sport when it doesn't snap back like a rawhide rope that breaks.

"You see how 'tis, boy," the man said, paying him off. "They'll get you 'count of the way you manhandled the bully."

"Yes, sir," the boy nodded, and rode away with his horse and pony, carrying the rather large outfit he had laid up, now that he was a wage earner.

He headed south into Texas. He was hunted by the realization of the way he had been protected. His mother shielded him, then his boss took his part. The habit of being slicked through hard places was on him. He felt the ease with which he had ducked trouble all his life. A certain emotion of pride coupled with his hidden self-confidence. He rode into the great Bird-head Brand domain. He swung down to ask at the ranch if they would take him on. A look at his lithe figure, the squaring of his shoulders, and the mean eye of his horse revealed him as a rider, all right. He was welcome, with a bunk and table place.

As he went in to eat that night, he saw one man who wore a gun, who was given the right of way by all the others, and who sat at the right hand of the foreman. Tip Mellon wondered at the different aspect of this man from all the others. He asked under his breath of the boy on his own right.

"He's a Ranger," the boy answered.

A Texas Ranger! Talk ran and rippled along the table to the accompaniment of dish-clatter and foody sounds. Afterward, the Ranger sat with some of the boys on a bench and listened. Now and again he said something, and he did tell a good story about a place down in the salt-grass country. At the same time he seemed a silent center around which all the talk and gesturing took its interest.

Mellon thought perhaps the fact that the man wore a revolver meant the difference. Then he noticed the subtleties of bearing, the minimum of motion, yielding the maximum of results. This was it!

Ranger Jack Reese shook a bag of tobacco and twisted his fingers over a paper. He had a cigaret in one-quarter the time it took any other man in the camp to make a smoke. When it was time to turn in, the Ranger stepped out of his chaps, belt, shirt, and was in his blankets while some of the boys were still wrestling with their boots. And the policeman of the mesquite wilderness was dressed while yet the echo of the wake-up call was in the air.

Then after breakfast Tip saw the Ranger toss a beautiful saddle on to a horse whose proud bearing was unmistakable, float up and dart away with one motion while the crew looked on. And Tip, himself a fast, easy worker, tried to short-cut into the day's work as the Ranger had done. All his life Tip had been taking care of himself. Now he rode out with a side-kick who talked Ranger tales.

The hero riders of Texas were these boys who showed the cattle country how to ride, how to do their duty, how to stand up and

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take it. If a Ranger ventured to put on a tiniest of airs, his fellows would see to that. The ranger must always be last in the crowd, least in the show places, keeping out of the center of things till needs must come the answer to the call of duty.

Tip Mellon heard of men who always played the game straight and fair. Often they rode alone, and two or three went into tough country to clean up where sheriff posses by the score had failed to make results. The boy who had been persuaded out of the Red Claybanks for fear of trouble to him heard of a few score men whose job it was to go make peace when fighting or bullying or thieving or raiding or any kind of rough-house meanness was going on.

In the face of what he learned about the Rangers, Tip Mellon flinched in his soul. He was mighty good with rope, rode about the worst of the horses and handled cattle with the best of them. But in the contacts with men he was ornery. He felt the contempt of his fellow workers as they maneuvered him around, letting him show his stuff as a cowboy but giving him every chance in the world to duck, slip through and evade the chance of standing up to bully or joker.

A GOOD man. What ailed him? How different he was from the man of a year or two greater age than himself whose every motion was watched by the boys, yet who said so little, was so gentle and polite, and fairly shrank from having himself go in ahead of the others. Mellon was quick enough in his wit. No one of slow mind could possibly have escaped trouble so often as he did. "Big Hank Houson," the Birdhead outfit bully, tried time and again to corner the slender youngster only to find the boy had somehow slipped from under, ducked around the corner or just vanished in the mesquite. Tip never faced the issue squarely. He looked afraid.

One day Tip was plaiting a rawhide rope. He had cut the strings weeks before, soaked them and then hung weights on each thong till the strings were hard. Then he soaked them again for another stretch. In this way he dragged each line to its utmost. When he at last soaked the strings and plaited them into an eight-ply braid, the strings were as slender as fine linen fishlines, and laid as beautifully into a rope not much larger than a carpenter's lead pencil. When he had it all woven up, the *hondo* noosed in and the ends turned back, no better lasso had ever been seen in those parts. Then for days he dragged the line behind him to take the slick and stiffness out of it.

Nowhere in the world is lariat dropping or lifting quite so well done as in the mesquite or a bit farther to the northeastward in the pine belt. Riding at full speed through standing timber, with branches hanging low, ducking and dodging in pursuit of a critter as agile as a buck deer, when the opening appears, ten or fifteen feet across, the rope is snapped from any position, overhang Spanish, poked like a Bowie knife, tossed like a clod, lifted like a bat, thrust forward like a fast draw from the hip, and a ten-inch loop is snatched up on a foreleg, a flying oval over the horns, or even as they say, "When he lifted his tail, I drapped two half-hitches on to hit!"

There Tip Mellon had learned his riding and cowhandling. So he was right good. The boys just had to let him live, yet begrudged the countless times they failed to break his leg or let him tumble, simply because he knew their tricks from long dodging.

They all knew it wasn't a good thing for a man never to stand up to trouble instead of greasing out of it. Tip never bulldogged a steer to throw it. Half his good riding was due to surprizes which baffled and tricked bad horses. He would turn the tables on those who tried to blunder him, leaving them upset not knowing what had happened to them. When Big Hank came thundering down on the gray scoundrel he rode, crowding the boy into the corral fence one day to give Tip the choice of going over or rolling a leg on the crooked mesquite poles, the victim pulled so that somehow in the dust the bully found himself against the fence with a leg that never would be straight again, and six months in the hospital, to boot.

Naturally, having spoiled a rider as good as Big Hank, Tip might as well draw his time. No one wanted to work with a man who seemed to be an easy mark till the pinch came, and then proved to be entirely out of the receiving end, leaving bullies, jokers, teasers and all the playful crowd discomfited and crippled.

"Why, that scoundrel cain't take a joke!" the boys said. "How the —— he

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does hit I don't know, but 'tain't right. He don't stand up to nothin'! He slicks yo', 'stid of hisse'f. He's catty an' pisen. Not a rattler, but one of them cottonmouths, hittin' 'thout no warnin'!"

So Tip rode on, glum and silent. He saved his own skin. He was always being picked on. The other fellows invariably got the worst of it. Yet he was despised. On him fell the snarling scorn of good men and dunderheads alike. As he rode away he learned a new word from the Birdhead jeering.

"He's a pariah, lean beggar dog of the range," a man who had once been a Yankee schoolboy and college student said at the parting.

Tip Mellon's figure stiffened, his hand drew on the reins ever so slightly, his horse grew tense, ready to go into action and, for an instant, the cowboys, watching him go, were alert as they realized the tormented youngster's impulse to turn and come beating it back to settle the trouble he was enduring, that reputation of being slick, not good.

But he held himself. He regretted his moderation for days afterwards. At every ranch he stopped on, a bunk, meals, open house waited for him, but no one wanted him to stay.

"Don't need you, Mellon," the foreman or rancher said.

They knew of Mellon two hundred miles ahead of him from the Birdhead.

"That feller's nursin' the most dog-gone peculiarest disposition 'at eveh any man accompanied hisse'f with," a rider explained in so many words. "He's treacherous, turnin' a good joke into some —— busted laig instead of hisn's own, so 'tain't no fun manhandlin' 'im. An' he needs hit! My ——! Tip Mellon ought-a be the worst mussed-up scoundrel theh is, on'y yo' cain't rope a cottonmouth. They ain' no button on the end of his tail, they ain't! Drap a rope on him, an' he skips hit, like hit was exercise. Sho! He packs a sixty-foot rawhide rope, but ——!"

Mellon rode on, knowing he wasn't wanted where he was known. No one lumped a clod at him. One man said if Tip was shot with a .45, the bullet'd sure bound back, like off'n a hard-wood, an' probably mess the shooter all up or anyhow his hoss. And so Tip Mellon arrived in Poison Oak, where he believed himself a total stranger.

Poison Oak, on the edge of the Rio Grande jungle, was an unpleasant place for any one in a cheerful or reputable mood. One saw dobe houses, thatched huts, combinations of stick-and-mud, and some genuine sawed-lumber emporiums. The population ranged from breed Indian to fallen Nordic. The entertainment offered a stranger was according to his ability to stand and take it. Tip Mellon had never been in just this kind of a town before. He did not pay much attention to its appearance even now. He just knew he had arrived somewhere, and riding up to the livery accommodations, he impatiently flipped down his pack and saddle, drove his two horses into the corral, and gently nodded to the short, squat and pin-eyed livery man his desire to have the things taken care of. Then he sauntered across the street to the hotel where he discerned signs of confusion and haste as he approached. He noticed, without comprehending, a quick exit of boys and several women in several directions.

When he entered the hotel he saw a number of silent, watchful men sitting or standing around decoratively.

"Room?" he asked the obvious clerk.

"Oh, ye'!" the clerk replied, lifting both hands and shoulders.

"All right," Mellon turned on his heel. "I want it."

As he strolled forth, an odd feeling, different from any he had ever known, warmed his skin. Poison Oak had thrilled to his arrival. He noted the fact in every glance, in the flutter of the buzzard humans who comprized most of the population of Poison Oak. The men shrugged and lifted their hands and shoulders, when he glanced at them; the women rolled their eyes at him as no women ever before had done. In his soul this attitude of respect and interest made a subtle, undefined change.

He could not explain the difference in his mind. He reckoned down the list of his looks, from the beautiful nutria of his hat to the soft appropriateness of his riding boots. Since the day he saw that Texas Ranger, he had fallen to the lure of imitation. He was wearing a fine-weave, gray woolen shirt, an iron-cloth pair of trousers, a Mexican bob-tailed jacket, an embossed belt and a good revolver in an out-flaring holster where it was really convenient. His outfit, which he had left at the livery included a carbine rifle in a saddle-boot.

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Oddly enough, his imitative drift did not now occur to him. The last thing in the world Tip Mellon would have expected, had happened. Poison Oak thought he was a Texas Ranger come to town on business. They knew a Ranger was needed there. Word had arrived that one was coming, but as usual the arrival had been some forty hours sooner than expected.

Ordinarily, Poison Oak could live or die in its own ways. Texas was divided up among the rangers, some two hundred and fifty-six thousand square miles by about 211 riders, or more than a thousand miles per rider. Quite a few of the rangers were sauntering back and forth at the railroad towns these days, seeking peace where a lot of war had been going on. Others were busy up in the oil country, and conditions were unusually mean a long ways from Poison Oak.

THEN a ruckus involved a lot of Poison Oak. Local industry had run in several moods, chiefly to transportation. On many a night just west of town, long silent trains of mules and packhorses went plodding up the line, heavy laden. Shadowy figures of riders accompanied these animals. Farther north the packers met automobile trucks, where cargoes were shifted and the animals turned back more or less empty for other loads. Then one night somebody felt he wasn't getting all of his, with the result that a jangle was heard out on the byway which was a switch-out to avoid parading up the main street of Poison Oak.

It was admitted that possibly on this particular night people had heard sounds, yes, even gunshots or possibly pistol or rifle shots, only the music was loud, the merriment great, the attention far from observant. But in the morning a boy came in with the information that some men were lying about in recumbent poses, several horses were also prostrate or groaning, covered by swarms of flies and other insects.

Caramba! Could it be so? Yes! Too very bad for expression. Behold, a sheriff and four deputies had apparently—no one could really be sure—been shot dead. No? Yes! But who knows? *Quien sabe?* Truly, a dreadful occurrence, yet no one in Poison Oak could possibly be to blame.

Thus Poison Oak was in mourning, so to speak, and suspiciously watchful when this stranger rode in without saying anything, in fact giving only the most laconic single-word directions or inquiries. Who then could he be but one of those Texas Rangers, least welcome of visitors in Poison Oak?

Tip Mellon, wrapped in his own thoughts, filled with ingrowing self-disgust had reached a dangerous crisis in his heart and soul. How often a man arrives at the point where he knows his own scandalous weakness, his own mean failure, his abject misery, and then temptation looms to lead him into some course different and usually down.

Having tended so strictly to his own business, Mellon had evaded the usual or casual follies of spendthrift cattle country riders. He wore a money belt which would have been his death, had any of hundreds known how much he had slily picked up in clandestine trades and through top-hand workmanship. Every dollar was honest, yet somehow disgraceful. Ingrowing selfishness had slicked him over with the least honorable reputation a square dealing man can have. He knew a hundred cowboy songs, yet never sang them aloud. He admired beautiful women, yet never complimented one with the knowledge of his regard. Nor had he ever taken a drink of raw spine-filled liquor. A ducker, he never had faced an issue squarely.

Drifting into Poison Oak, his intentions were as remote from honorable as a man's could be. Yet not knowing how to let go, he went forth down the wretched main street, giving sidelong glances to right and left from well-veiled pupils, debating with himself how best to begin his let-down; in what way to bust wide open through the crust of clean behavior into the mad life of drink, women and bullying.

Stepping gracefully, swaggering unconsciously, acknowledging the glances bestowed on him with the turn of his bright blue eyes, he looked the fine rider he was, a cowboy who could swing along despite the exaggerations of his boot-heels.

Nine doors up the street a dobe wall came flush to the packed earth of the pathway which served as a side walk. As he passed a tiny barred window in this wall, he heard a whisper—

"Oh, senor, tonight, is it, by the mid-road mesquite, eh?"

A glimpse revealed the speaker as a pale, dark-haired, beautiful-faced young woman. He went on his way, having nodded. He

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thrilled to the thought of romance. He stepped lightly, a young man charmed by a handsome girl's attention. He was on tiptoes, ready to take the plunge into those wretched depths which are the refuge of the wayward, the unresourceful, the seekers of profane delights. He sauntered up the street, crossed over and came back down the far side, covertly observing the neat structure of the dried mud building in which lurked the siren of the barred window.

Sunset was already close at hand. He went to eat at the hotel, where he found a deliciously roasted chicken with more good things to eat with it than he had enjoyed in many a day. Over him hovered obsequiously the gentleman who wished most heartily the patron would choke to death or die of a thousand torments or take his departure promptly. Tip Mellen, long familiar with involuntary respect and contempt, now found himself the object of deep, abiding terror. His glance fairly lifted, curled up men into intense expectancy. The squat, heavy-featured woman wife-cook whose unlovely figure appeared at intervals stared at him with wide, bulging eyes of unmistakable alarm. Yet he carelessly dismissed these weak tremors. His thought was of the girl he was to meet out on the road at the place where a mesquite had led to the switch-outs on both sides, rather than have the trouble of cutting the obstruction down.

In caution, the young man who was used to vanishing, took his place not under or beside the mesquite, but at a safe distance where he could see plainly without being observed. He saw at last the pale shadow appear. He slipped noiselessly to see the better. The rendezvous had been kept, and at his low hail the young woman came rushing to him.

"I tell you everything!" she exclaimed. "They have kill' my father. He was the deputy, Rosbeck. At the bottom of all thees things is the commissary-keep, Pequan Hazeley. I tell you true! They would keel me if they know I tell thees thing. Eef you look in the Beeg Tangle, you fin' a t'ousand t'ings, contrabrand. I am alone. My mother dead, my father keeled, an' but for my knife, my gun. W'ere would I be?"

"You're white blood!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes! Creole. My father was by his father a Yankee. Look out, for they keel you if they dare. They tremble the way you come by! I laugh for they say they don' allow yo' to come. But look at Diaz, he carry your saddle an' pack into the office, an' he say he cut your throat if you come to bozzar heem."

In her eagerness, she had leaned close to whisper low in his ear. The perfume of her breath was like some extravagant flower's. Her two hands rested on his left forearm. Her lips were within an inch of where his would be if he should turn his face, suddenly. He reached to touch her shoulder, comfortingly. For a time Tip Mellon forgot what he really was. He had the joyous sensation of being there to protect this beautiful, brave but terribly jeopardized daughter of a man who had been killed by smuggling bootleggers and runners of illicit traffic across the Rio Grande and through the edge of the jungles past Poison Oak into the realms of pseudo respectables who clamored for laws and enforcement that would not spoil their own profits or passions.

When she had told him the story, given him the inside of the whole wretched business, not sparing her own father who had taken his until the politicians decided to interfere in favor of more graft, she stood for a minute in trembling excitement. She hesitated to slip back the way she had come. If she was seen, suspected of this meeting, what fate would be hers? Yet she had dared chance it.

She drew back, turned and circled by a cowpath in and out as he stillhunted behind her, seeing her safely home. She faded into the rear of her square-house. He heard the soft lumpy sound as the heavy bars fell into place, fastening the solid door. He edged on until he turned out of the packers' trace to the rear door of an open dance hall.

He looked inside at tables, a curtained bar and through much smoke from brown paper cigarets and particularly pungent odorous tobacco. He saw at three tables no less than eleven heads tucked close together like birds picking corn, and the shoulders, elbows, and necks were nearly as active as those of chickens would have been. Hazeley, Tangle, Diaz, Creegon—he recognized a number of them. He drew into the black shadow to where he could listen. Happily, having worked so long with

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vaqueros as well as with cowboys, he knew the dialect perfectly.

So! To them he was a Texas Ranger! Did he look like one, act like one of those splendid, intrepid men? Tip Mellon leaned against the dobe, mud-plastered over-poles that built this place of *fandango*, jig-time, and jazz. Even here he had been drifting with the current. He had continued the slick, easy way of avoiding trouble. Keeping tryst with a pretty girl, he had let her talk, sorry he had made a mistake, sorry in his soul that she was also mistaken, but he hadn't enlightened her. With the worst intentions, he quietly, nicely evaded exposing himself. She did not know she had been tricked.

Escaping his conscience, he wanted to enter this dance hall, drink illicit liquor, catch up one or other of the wanton girls trafficking there, but between him and the floor were these whispering men, planning his discomfiture, uttering their undying hate sibilantly, and yet who were afraid of him, dared not make an attack because they mistook him for a Texas Ranger, a man who faced things!

True, come to think of it, he was a good looker, dressed the part nicely and kept his mouth shut. The easiest listener anywhere, his ears were wonderfully keen. His eyes read thoughts in the gesture of a finger, the twitch of a nose and the shine of eyes. Always in the past, watchfulness had enabled him to foresee trouble, to dodge what was coming.

An odd shame mocked him. With his nostrils still sweetened by the perfumed girl, realizing the trust of a lovely girl when she poured the truth into his false ears. A Texas Ranger? What a scoundrel he really was. Embarrassed by his treachery to the hopeful girl, who dared her neighbors' vengeance to warn him of the particular scoundrels to watch, he at last saw the truth. A sneaking masquerader, a slick dodger, what didn't he lack of being a Ranger!

Two ways offered him now. He must make a choice of one or the other. For the first time in his life, he hesitated to take the easy course. A kind of fire began to burn in his heart, as he contemplated the fact that he could back out, sneak to the corral and make his getaway on his horses, or he could deny the tremors of his heart and soul—do the desperate thing he never had done before!

FOR months he had practised the feat. He strolled through the rear doorway, rolling a cigaret with his left hand—deftly; he was among the schemers, surrounded on all sides by them, with that gliding smoothness he so long had practised in another spirit.

"A light, senor?" he asked, turning to Pequan Hazeley who faded from a rich ocherous orange to a musty tiger lily blue.

"*Si, si*—Yeh," the store-keeper hissed with passing breathlessness.

A dozen times the wretched scoundrel essayed to strike a match for the cool young man who stood among them. Eleven times he broke the head of the match so it fell sputtering to the wet table top. And then he reached a trembling hand with a flickering flame for this arrival in their conference.

"Hold still!" Mellon ordered, and the man froze in terror.

"Thanks!" Mellon said gently, his cigaret lighted as he strolled on toward the floor where the screen of dancing had hid the backdoor gathering to decide this matter of a Ranger who had come to town just in time to force them all to sit tight.

"Music?" Tip Mellon turned to the players, who had stopped in a jangle of surprize. Hastily they began to play, five pickers each a different tune, one mournful, one clamorously strident, the other old favorites in between. As they sought concordance, Mellon bowed to one of the less repulsive women who stepped with pitiful obedience into his arms to dance as he elected.

As he circled, not so very skillfully, he saw on all sides the frozen attention of this crowd. Here was the headquarters. Here were the desperate crew, the gangsters who plotted and carried out the illicit traffic through these parts. A score, two-score, would willingly have attacked him, only they feared first his own self-defense, and then the inevitable follow-up of a lieutenant or captain with four or five devils who would never rest till every shooting or stabbing man was dead. True, by cleaning him now, they could scurry away, might not be overtaken for years and might even be safe below the border. Nevertheless, this would hurt business, very profitable business.

Accordingly, Mellon danced his turn, slipped the girl a good silver coin, rolled another cigaret and studied the faces on all sides, wondering to see so many pig

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eyes, dog noses, monkey ears, twitching and evading the directness of his scrutiny. He just stood there, leaning against a muscular tree trunk supporting the roof, wondering to find himself so thoroughly respected. Not a smile tormented him, not a jeer disgraced him, not a least trace of contempt humiliated his self-respect. They would, at a word, drop on their knees should he demand it. But he didn't. He thought of it, but couldn't. No Texas Ranger would exact even from these poisonously hateful people that homage.

Tip Mellon was sorry for them. Criminals, they never had learned any better; cruel murderers, they were but beastly and afraid; they were ignorant like hawks or the rare jaguars which sometimes come into that particular jungle, lost out of the tropics to the southward.

Mellon strolled forth, turning his back on them all. He was safe, perhaps not perfectly safe, but just so, a Texas Ranger would have let them all know his confidence in his own self and in their self-restraint.

And when he had gone on into the shadows, presently he knew some one was in the gloom, whispering. The voice told him what the daughter of Rosbeck had already told him, adding details. Plenty of liquor had come in. The tins of dope were all in Hazeley's store. The dead had all been buried, it was true, but so many of the smugglers had been shot that the pack train had been disordered, so they had expected to hurry a new one on this very night, but for senor's inopportune arrival. *Caramba*, he was a devil to be there! And if he did not die of poison in the morning at breakfast, this, his best friend in the world, would be grateful to a white man's divinity. Indeed so!

The informant rustled a dry leaf, vanishing. Tip Mellon circled around, finding himself perturbed. He had merely preceded the real Texas Ranger. Without saying a word, merely by looking and acting thus, he had come to masquerade as a member of the hero band. Just to know he looked and acted the part gave the cowboy an emotion of wish and longing beyond any dream he had ever had. That lovely girl saw nothing strange in his trustworthiness, in his bearing; felt no twang of suspicion against him. Yet he was a snake, a poison thing himself, not what he seemed.

In his room he buried his face, his cheeks hot and his soul perturbed by longing on the one hand and the truth of it all on the other. In another day, the real Ranger would come riding in. He would slide from his horse, give his belt a hitch, glance up and down the street, and then begin business.

Dozing at intervals, dreaming whether asleep or awake, Tip Mellon passed the worst night of his life. Even the fact of his great hour now depressed him. His finest instinct had been a false gesture. He had even listened to sweet lips telling him what was not his to know. The real Ranger would give one look, grin, possibly even waste a tiny shrug of contempt on the wretch exposed. From that moment the pretender would be withered.

Dawn flushed the sky. Tip Mellon was up with the sun. He went to breakfast. Before him was spread a number of excellent dishes, including coffee—black, rich coffee. At the whiff of the aroma, Mellon forgot his mean imposition. He turned his glance to where his host stood shrunk up in anxiety only partly concealed.

"Come here!" Mellon smiled and when, the man with shoulders on two levels came, his eyes rocking up and down added, "Drink!"

"*Sca-a-a!*" The man lifted on his toes like a rooster, then dropped on his knees to say, "*Mercil Mercil*"

The wretch screamed. By goddesses and gods, by heavens and hades, he declared, and denied that he meant any harm. Only he begged with wails to be excused from drinking the coffee. It was exceedingly bad for his stomach. He had not known it was the intention of anybody to mix poison in it, but he would kill the cook instantly if only Mellon laughed.

"I want coffee, not that," the visitor said. "Also, eat—of each dish. No, ——! Keep your dirty fingers out, and with a clean spoon each time!"

Apparently, only the coffee had been poisoned. Mellon ate, and the host emptied half the cup of the next lot of coffee, to drink it from another cup. So Mellon breakfasted well with a certain degree of safety. Then he emerged on the street. He saw a young woman on her way toward the stores. She was the girl of the mid-road mesquite. By day and in the open she was still beautiful. With sick heart he saw himself the object of her covert, but admiring glance—just a flutter of those marvelous eyes.

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He saw, too, other attentions, also covert, given to the brave young woman's passing. From behind him, he heard her called Senorita Terina Rosbeck—information for his ears. Owner, apparently, of a ranch to the northward, but here now at her father's because he was lately dead, as he was reported to have been killed, so to speak.

Whisperings came to his ears. From windows, from brush, from rooms and wherever he went informants poured into him, for his exaltation, the details and the lies about the killing. He knew by the tones when truth, part truth and falsehood came to him. Long habituated to reading men, he knew them now exceedingly well. He hesitated to go away. He dared not remain to face exposure. His hour of pride and respect was sweet in his soul!

Then up the roadway in early afternoon, when ordinarily the siesta would have been upon Poison Oak, he saw a horseman coming. No need to tell Tip Mellon he had remained too long. The rider passed the mid-road mesquite, his horse a homely brute with a big head and innumerable protuberances of bone from nose and brows to hips.

The newcomer was a wizened-up man, with head thrust forward and sunken cheeks, tiny black eyes and scrupulously clean if nondescript shirt and vest, trousers and jaunty hat. He reined up at the hotel, letting fall his bridle reins. The horse wriggled from nose to tail, twitched and then in a nonchalant way, reached with his right hind hoof to scratch himself under the jaw and up against the ear. The rider grinned, remarking to Mellon, who happened to be nearest—

"AIN'T he the dog-gondest, now?"

"He shore is!" Mellon grinned, though he did not feel like it.

The man was a real ranger. The point of his nose was intrusive. Yet his glance was quiet, disarming, his voice was much softer than one expected, and in his shirt pocket the fakir caught a glimpse of the not-too-well-concealed badge.

"*Caramba, dos!*" a voice whispered. "For why, two?"

The expression of the newcomer changed but slightly as he turned to look around with a complete casualness that would fool no one, least of all Mellon in his guilt. Here was a real Texas Ranger, come to clean up. If only Tip, the cowboy, had been a genuine member of that band, he would have given, forfeited, thrown away everything he held precious.

The Ranger's wandering rapid fire of glances swept up and down the street, returning to look inquisitively at Tip Mellon who stood leaning against the wall. Mellon had felt the watchfulness of a thousand onlookers. Now he saw himself revealed as never before to any man. And this observer crinkled his forehead and his nose, his gray pearl eyes flickering as they stared at the cowboy's face. Something needed explanation. Two Rangers, eh? How come? What the ——, Um-m! Mellon knew what the man was thinking.

An old-timer, this rider for the law, probably coming forty years, perhaps a lieutenant or a captain—the real article just naturally wasn't making any mistakes. Something in the boy's expression told a lot. No man ever begged a Texas Ranger for mercy, meaning it, without being understood and given it, even if the pleading was for a benefit undeserved.

"I don't reckon I eveh did get to see you, sonny?" the Ranger said in a voice so low only Mellon could hear.

"Tip Mellon, the Birdhead, Oklahoma, and the pine belt of the Ozarks," the boy replied. "I can tell you something here, anyhow."

"Good," the Ranger smiled. "I'm hongry, though. We'll suspend judgments."

So the Ranger understood instantly. No talking where the very ground had ears. Tip turned to the hotel keeper, saying:

"If you can feed us without poison, we'll eat, now!"

"Poison. Sacred idols of Yucatan! Who dreamed of eet?" the man growled.

"Poison, sonny?" the Ranger presently inquired when the enthusiasm of the hotel keeper had been restrained, lest he leave nothing edible off the table of this terrible pair. A nod from Tip explained. The man regarded the scene with an odd, amused interest.

"Didn't Tabeau see you-all at the Birdhead?" the Ranger inquired, casually. "I'm Fresmore."

"Oh, yes. But how come he remembered me?" Tip asked. "I didn't—"

"He saw the crowd ragging yo' too much. He figured likely you mightn't always stand

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fo' hit," Fresmore explained. "We all are kind-a forehandedly lookin' oveh outfits, you know. Neveh can tell when we might need to particularize a man's description. A rider as good as you-all mout naturally be needed, one way or another sometime."

They sauntered down the middle of the street, out of ear-shot.

"Now't we're acquainted, boy, how come, sonny, they thought yo's a Ranger?"

Fresmore's eyes were glinting. A pretender is a pretty ornery proposition.

Tip told the truth. He began at the beginning. For years he had kept his mouth shut. Inside, he was an honest actor. But outside, he looked a lie, not caring what happened, what people thought, if he slipped clear himself. His riding, roping, shooting were superb, yet his treachery had saved him trouble, fooling his tormenters. Slicking out of trouble was obeying his mother's injunction not to fight.

Fresmore listened with blank expression. Poison Oak had simply mistaken Tip for a Ranger. The girl's trustful admiration—well, that was it. To keep her regard even for a day, Tip had accepted the honor, braved the danger, and had taken the responsibility. He told where the goods were, who had led the bushwhackers to assassinate the sheriff and his posse, and the lay of the land.

"That's all there is to it," the Ranger said thoughtfully. "Going to see it through with me, sonny?"

"What — What!" Mellon whispered. "You let me go?"

"Shucks!" the man laughed softly. "'Tain't no crime bein' mistook for a Ranger, nor lookin' like one! Why not live up to it, now?"

Mellon froze. He was forgiven his imposition. He saw the banged-up claw of the man handing him something—a badge.

"Put it in yore pants," the man said. "Come on!"

They sauntered lightly down the roadway side by side, on their toes. Mellon had buffaloed them. The gang had simply not known how to act, what to do. Only now they were cornered; the time for action was at hand. The two arrived at the Hazeley store.

The raid was direct, the resistance that of cornered rats. For two minutes the fight was terrific. Then the state of Texas, as represented by two slender, rather wiry and competent men, took possession. Blood was running down the face of the younger, and the older one's left foot left a stain wherever it stepped. Three men who needed hanging would never be hanged.

The smuggled and contrabrand things were all stocked up, the criminals having had no time to hustle them away. Mellon helped his captain with the bad leg since his own scalp wound was just a scratch. Besides, as the peaceable population came to look on, one young woman made her appearance right quickly. With a cry, she sprang to take care of the young man, while Fresmore grinned.

"Much obliged for takin' cyar of my man," Fresmore said to her.

"Oh, I owe you so much!" she turned to him. "Coming when you did so quickly! I was afraid. They hated me—"

"Yes, sure!" Fresmore looked at her as Mellon drew back to stare.

"Oh, I had to do it!" She blinked her eyes. "I made 'em think he was a Ranger —so—so they'd leave me alone, and they'd be tricked and caught."

"You knew I wasn't a Ranger?" Mellon gasped, staring at her.

"Oh, sure I knew!" she blinked her eyes. "The way you first looked at me. No Ranger on business ever looked thataway! But the way you let me think you would hold them all till *el capitan* should come—"

She shrugged her shoulders, smiled with a flash of her eyes. She knew Tip Mellon had bridged for the law, come what might from criminal or the real Ranger. He colored, humbled. He hadn't fooled the most important woman in the world, not a bit. She must despise him, having used his own bluff! Captain Fresmore and Terina Rosbeck exchanged laughing glances.

"Was I wrong to you, doing that?" She beautifully changed her taunt to supplication that she might not tease him who so often had been jeered.

"You couldn't be!" he huddled up. "I'm no good."

The two laughed, delighted.

"You're all right, now, kid," Fresmore remarked, "you've learned yo'r lesson right plumb complete! The Ranger neveh lived who wasn't sure humble, knowin' Texas trusts 'im. Knowin' too, that somewhere theh's a woman to make him eat out of her hand, jes' plumb tamed, huh!"

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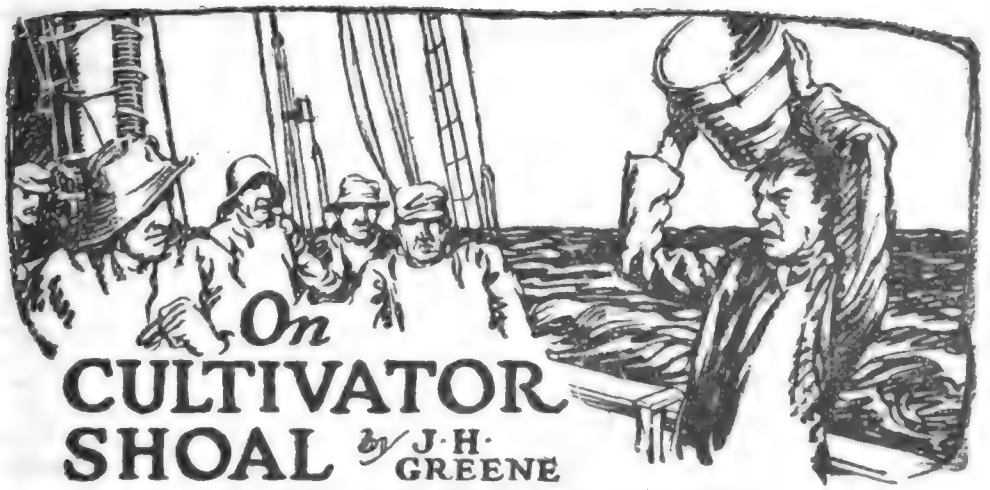

On CULTIVATOR SHOAL

by J. H. GREENE

Author of "Judique on the Floor," "The Joss in the Focsle," etc.

"YE DON'T happen to need a hand, sorr?"

Captain Si Mellish looked up from the deck of the *Annie* at the man accosting him from the fish pier.

The *Annie* did need a hand. One of her crew had been taken to a hospital, and her fifteen foot dories needed two men apiece. But the grim looking old fisherman was not shipping a loafer off the water-front, especially Boston's, without due consideration.

Carefully Si summed up the smiling fellow with the red eyebrows, the confident grin, the soft ingratiating brogue. The man's new serge had not been slept in; he was rather pale for a sailor man, but his hands looked hard and his shoulders were big enough to lay back on dory oars.

"Been to sea?" Si asked slowly.

"An' me with a quartermaster's rating! I'll come on board and show ye me papers."

The agility with which he leaned over and caught at a stay with his palm to drop to the deck was enough for Si.

"Don't want no papers. Done any fishing?"

"An' me a Limerick man!"

"Who knifed yer and what fur? We don't stand for knifers."

When the Irishman had reached inside his shirt for his wallet Si had caught a glimpse of a long fresh scar plowed through the thick red hair on his chest.

"Oh, that was a Black and Tan bayonet. Got it in the throuble. The war wid the English. But that's all over now, for awhile anyway. Ye won't be holding that agin me, sorr?"

The man was pleasant, frank and genial, quite unlike the other red head, the plug-ugly fish clerk shouting at Si from the pier and the main source of Si's racial prejudices.

"Say, you. You're through, ain't yer? I give yer yer money. Why don't yer pull out? We'll charge yer dockage. Look at them vessels waiting to come in."

The fellow was bawling with all the arrogance of the town's politicians.

Behind the *Annie* was crowding a Provincetown haddocker with her hatches off and her hold a white compost of ice and fish. Behind her were two flounder draggers with their trawl nets, like thick cobwebs, drying on their masts. Beyond these were several guinea boats painted blue and frowsy.

"I'm waiting for my crew," said Si mildly. "Shove off her stern, lad, will yer?"

The Irishman promptly put his arms against the poles. The *Annie's* stern responded to his strength and moved out. Into the open water dived the haddocker and the flounder draggers. The haddocker got in first, holding back the guinea boats. A violent argument arose in many dialects. The Portuguese on the haddocker wanted Si to cast completely off. Black-eyed, thick-browed men raged furiously at Si.

"I'm thinking knives'd come in handy," said the Irishman. "Pass me that pump handle and I'll clane them up if they touch yer hawser."

"They won't do that. They don't mean nothing. The market is high and they

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want to weigh up and sell 'fore it breeds. How many barrels yer got, Man'l?"

The captain of the haddocker who had been erupting in a leonine bass replied with a smile at once fierce and friendly.

"Three hundred barrels, I figure. I geeve away dory full to one o' dem gulpers."

"And I didn't make the wharfinger's bill, and lost two trawls. Get yer shack," added Si to the Irishman. "We'll start soon as the men come."

The new hand of the *Annie* climbed up on the wharf as expertly as he had come on board. Already the trucklers were lifting the barrels of fish from the haddocker. The Irishman was caught in the turmoil of unloading. He was beside a busy thoroughfare, Wall Street of the waterfront.

The dock was slippery with the drippings from barrels and the chipped ice. He lost his footing on a disembowelled cod. A man hosing the pier of its refuse sprayed him with spray. He remonstrated, and the man, intent on his job turned the hose near the new Irishman shoes of the Irishman. The latter sported up laden with mire. It was a deliberate and wanton challenge.

"Let's see what you're made of, hey," said the Irishman, lowering a heavy hand on the hoser.

"What's the matter wid yer? What yer want?"

"I want to teach yer manners."

"Aw, sleep it off in yer bunk. Don't bring it ashore. We're busy."

The hoser was as big as the Irishman, with [illegible], a Cork scowl, and the Munster [illegible] that went with his black curls. He wore white shirt sleeves with [illegible] and a lead pencil behind his ear, [illegible] no attention to the Irishman's [illegible]. He dropped the hose, which [illegible] its erratic spouting, and disappeared into one of the fish dealer's offices.

The Irishman lost time in saving his [illegible] from the hose. He followed the hoser into the office. Fishermen were [illegible]wding round getting their slips cashed. The office led to the other side of the pier where the confusion was worse. The basin was jammed with craft of all kinds. A steam trawler was being unloaded; her steam and smoke hung low along the wharf in the dull September weather. Through its fog ran bawling men with trucks, men arguing prices, and hoses spurted in all directions. A barrel of flounders had been spilt and again the Irishman nearly sprawled as he trod on them.

Nobody had time for lessons in manners, so the Irishman beat a retreat to the shore [illegible] the gray towers of Boston looked [illegible]ily down upon him.

"New England, is ut?" he murmured. "I said the Irish own it. They work too hard here, that's the throuble."

But despite his verdict he went to his rooming house to pay his bill and get his grip—that degenerate descendant of the old-time seaman's chest—and then headed back for the *Annie*.

AT THE first supper in the forecastle the new hand, Mike Scanlon, was affable, talkative and eager to establish himself. He told of foreign ports, Hongkong, the Mediterranean and how he had been wrecked in the Azores.

"We just piled up on the rocks and dhrank the wine the natives passed us till we were ordered to abandon the ship. Nothing to worry about. All cut and dhry like an Englishman's battle."

He did not say much about the Irish army till he had tried out the political feelings of the crew. When he found that these men, mostly New Englanders, with a few Portuguese, had no politics and no prejudices beyond working, sleeping and feeding, he began his yarns of guerilla engagements, of fantastic playboy generals and privates, of war made witty.

"I seen wrecks in the Azores," commented old Tony Prada. "Ever been in a wind-jammer?"

Tony had taken Mike's comment as a reflection on his native Islands. Mike had never been in any vessels but steamships.

Tony grunted and began to relate how he had been three years reaching the United States from the Azores because he had been shanghaied out of New York harbor without ever touching the shore and carried round the Horn.

"Dat captain, he —— of feller. I seen heem shoot man in the cross trees. Man geev lot of troub. Sea-lawyer sort of feller. He sassed the captain. Captain shoot three time and then tell me go aloft for heem. I find de man. Marblehead feller he was. He was froze to the rigging and shot through the head. The *Dayspring* she always have stain on that old foresail till it

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blew away. I tell you we glad to see it blow. Unlucky."

The men had heard that yarn a thousand times. The older men had better yarns. The young men had been bred on such; it was their legendary background, and as stale as their alphabets. But Mike had listened with horror, with all the indignation that had made soldiers out of buckeens.

"The swine! He couldn't do it now. The swine!"

"Maybe that sailor was a swine too. We had the sweepings of the jails in our forecastle them days. I know. My father was a whaler—"

Si's reminiscences were interrupted by the swell off Minot's light.

"Better take a reef in the mainsail," said Si, rising from the table. "Wind's making and the glass is dropping. Mike, you can turn in."

Mike had risen, eager to do his share.

"When's my watch, sorr?" he asked.

"Ain't no watches, 'cept when we're on fish. Then it's all the time. And yer don't have to touch yer hat and call me 'sir'."

Mike liked the vessel, and the crew even if they were rather unresponsive in conversation, for Tony had been the only one who had contributed.

"Sort of a family affair, this vessel," he said to the cook. "It's the way we had in the army. No brass hatting. No gold lace. Just as much discipline as we ask for and not a word further. Every man allowed his say. Lemme help with that slushing."

The cook was cleaning up after supper, and Mike took one of the dishes. But he began a story of a Sligo man who refused to take orders from an officer whose father had less grounds and pigs than his had, and forgot all about the dish washing till the cook relieved him of the dish. The cook did not want his help. The cook did not want to be superseded by a man learning his trade, for the cook stayed on the vessel when the crew had to go out in the dories.

THE *Annie* was running before a northwest wind. She was off Georges Bank with her big main boom out over the water, the leach wet where it had dipped into the long regular sea lifting her counter. As she was empty she rolled a great deal.

"Let's have some of yer quartermasterin', Mike," said Si, when the before-dawn breakfast was over.

Mike squatted on the little seat and took the backward slanting wheel from the man who had been holding it. The crew were getting ready the trawl buckets and hauling up bait from the hold.

"Keep her west a quarter west," said Si.

The crew looked aft to watch the man who had steered liners into the ports of the world. Mike set his boots for a foothold squarely on the heeling deck for that sea was like a bucking saddle. The compass was set in a box against the hatchway. He had to bend forward to see the rather grimy card. The glass was not clean and the points not very distinct.

By this time the baiters were at work. Herring frozen into blocks at the freezers and still hard were being cut on the top of the cabin. The men stood plying their knives and placing bits of the fish on the hooks. The trawls, after the baiting, had to be carefully coiled back into the buckets, the hooks on their gangers so arranged to run free when the trawls were set from the dories. Mike stole a stealthy look at the proceedings.

"Keep her away, Mike, or she'll jibe," said Si, and Mike realized he had a boss over him on a job he was not quite sure of.

For the *Annie* was not so easy to keep on a course as a bulky, sea-shouldering, deeply laden liner. She was no inert mass of iron; she danced over the water like a cork, at the mercy of every slapping sea, every changing gust.

The compass card jerked on the gimbals as if a sea were in the binnacle; Mike missed the sedate variations of a big steamer from her course. Besides he was distracted by the deftness of the baiters, the spray on his neck, the whine of the sheet blocks, the drumming of the reef points on the tight canvas, the flutter of the jib when it lost the wind, and the roar of the bubbling seas close to his side. Mike's quartermastering had been done on sheltered bridges, with the compass close to his eyes, no sails to disturb him, bells and speaking trumpets to help him, and the sea far below him.

The weather was very flawy; a gust filled the mainsail and brought her head round; it fell away in the hollow of the sea. Mike did not know enough to allow for this caprice of a wind-jammer. The big boom

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came close inboard and at the swing the men suddenly lowered their heads.

"Port yer helm, man," cried Si, grabbing the wheel from Mike while one of the men paid out the sheet.

"You nearly jibed her. Leggo the wheel. You can steer but you can't sail. 'Tain't enough to watch the compass—"

Si had ejected Mike from the seat and the indecisive mainsail filled with the wind and settled down to steady drawing.

"Yer got to have yer eyes on the wind. Larn to see it coming over the water. And you must watch the sea for it throws yer and you lose the wind in the hollows. And yer must have eyes on yer sails too and when you see that luff fluttering—"

"Instruction course for green hands. Sounds like them officers on the training ship. Bawl him out, Si."

The speaker was Billy Snow, just out of high school, on his first voyage, but almost cradled in a dory, with sea lore in his veins and tides in his blood. Mike had been tossed away from that wheel like deadwood. He was clinging to the lee railing, laughed at by the crew who rose above him as the deck lifted, laughed at by the sea that poured over the rail and foamed in over his boot-tops.

"Maybe he quartermastered the *Mauretania*. But that don't help much in a fishing schooner off Georges."

"Wonder if he could steer a New York ferryboat through Hudson River ice."

"Maybe he paddled a canoe with the Irish army," capped Billy.

The men were merciless. Mike's glib loquacity had irritated them. He was fair game for their instinct to hound an alien.

"I was quartermaster of the *Cloncurry*," he bawled back at them as he crawled forward past the end of the line of men, trying to get near to Billy.

"So you said," called Si from his wheel. "How about them papers you spoke of when I shipped yer? Let's see 'em."

By this time Mike had come close to Billy who had continued his baiting, cutting up the fish, tightening ganger knots with his teeth, and all the while uttering fresh jibes at Mike's seamanship.

At Si's request Mike appeared embarrassed; he did not open his oilers to get at his wallet.

"He ain't got no papers, Si," cried Billy. "Sailors don't have them no more. They have a book that is kept by the captain. I know. My brother is mate on a fruiter."

"He bluffed yer, Si," cried an older man, "like old times. I once shipped on a dead man's papers. It was all right till his Cardiff wife turned up and wanted my money."

"I bet you, Si, he hasn't even got his Seaman's Federation card. That goes with the book too."

"I tell yer what I have got, me larribuck," answered Mike to Billy. "I've a pair of fisties—"

"Stow that," cried Si suddenly. "I don't care if yer have bluffed me. Yer willing, and we can larn yer. Sit down and try yer hand at baiting trawl."

The jeering ceased at Si's tone which proved that the communistic crew had a captain. And Mike had to put his anger in cold storage for a more convenient time and place.

He took out his knife and began to cut up the fish. He had quick eyes and was clever at picking up new trades. But his hurt pride smoldered within him and he had not acquired the pride in that trade that would keep his fires under. He lost his balance when the stern sunk and ran the barb of a hook into his palm. With a totally disproportionate curse he tugged frantically at the shank till the blood streamed from his hand.

"Don't pull it out; cut it. Hold on, let me," shouted Si, leaving the wheel to Tony and coming towards Mike.

" 'Tain't like putting worms on a bent pin, is it Mike?" joshed the irrepressible Billy.

The crew laughed uproariously with their clown, and Mike's temper went by the board. He loosened a volley of fluent Limerick and aimed a blow at Billy with his bloody hand. The knife was still in his left and that fist too had clenched round it for another blow.

SI STEPPED between them and with the jerky jolt of an old man to Mike's jaw he sent the trouble-maker flying along the deck. Mike did not stop falling until he backed against the starboard dories.

"No knifing," shouted Si.

The sterns of the dories struck Mike in the rear like a series of vigorous kicks. They awoke the soldier in him. He took

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hold of his temper; he looked back to see no one was behind him; he recovered his fighting balance and he dropped the knife.

"How about buckets when it's fourteen to one?" he answered, as he lifted a bucket from the top dory and flung it into the mass of men aft.

"Call me a liar, do yer? Ye thransplanted cockneys. Ye sea shop-keepers wid yer Brummagem British Tit-Bits jokes. I'm a sailor and a soldier and a gintelman. I'll mop ye up as we did the Black and Tans at Muckross Abbey."

He was abusive but collected, furious but watchful, mad and sane at once, ready for all odds, the bigger the better.

Si spoke a low word to Tony who was at the wheel. Tony jammed the wheel down. The *Annie's* head swung round to port, and the big boom came inboard.

Mike did not see it coming. He could see nothing but men to be tackled. He saw their heads drop to avoid the boom but that meant nothing to him. Mike would not have lowered his defiant head to spitting machine guns.

The boom caught him on the side of the temple, sent him reeling toward the rail and then swung leisurely to starboard. Tony brought the *Annie* round on the other track while Si reached, just in time to save Mike from going into the sea. A dozen men had no difficulty in holding the stunned Irishman to the deck.

"Throw him below till he cools off," said Si when Mike opened his eyes and they saw his skull had not been crushed.

Mike was dragged by the collar and thrown down the forecastle hatchway.

"The Irisher!" cried Billy to the cook below. "Si had to jibe and put him out with the boom."

Fore and aft the men were crying up Tony's clever handling that had saved them from the murderous rush of the Irishman. Old-timers were talking of lashing Mike to the mast, of turning him loose in a dory.

"Dories cost money," said Si. "Ain't going to be no lashings nuther. We'll need him when we larn him."

The men went back to their baiting and Si to his eternal musing on the waters for hints where to cast his trawls, when a clamor came from the forecastle. A heavy Irishman, a light cook and a flying dish of potatoes were erupted from the hatchway. Mike was still groggy from that blow of the boom or the cook might have followed the potatoes blowing away to leeward.

"Will yer answer me a question, sorr?" said Mike. "It's been bothering me. Did yer hit me with that boom on purpose or was it just British blundering through?"

The rage seemed to have died out of him. His fighting snarl was gone, his soft questioning was that of a hungerer for knowledge at a hedge school.

"It's an old trick, Mike," said Si, warily and seeking peace. "Show him, Tony."

With a slight pull of his wrist Tony again brought in the boom. The massive spar shook as Tony paid it out and in. It poised over the water like a tremendous arm ready for another blow. Mike stared at it, impressed, and kept safely beside the mast.

"Don't that bang Banagher!" he murmured, turning with admiration to watch Tony, for it was the little old Portuguese, the man of many wind-jammers who had put him out.

"Bhoys, ye know more than I do. Billy, I'm sorry I hit yer wid the knife in me fists. Let me stay on deck. I want to learn that thrick. It's no disgrace to be knocked out wid a shillalah like that."

Si, however, insisted on his going below to the after cabin to have his hand bound.

"I can't reach wid this bandage," said Mike, after Si had dressed his hooked hand and given a look to the bump on his head. "Cap'n—I beg your pardon, sir—Si, I mane, will ye get me pocketbook out of me cholera belt?"

Si undid the Irishman's clothes and felt till he found the flannel belt round his waist. There was a pocket in this containing a wallet. From the wallet Mike drew an old newspaper cutting which he asked Si to read. It was only a few lines in a North Australian paper telling of a steamer that had come into port with all hands but two dead or dying from cholera contracted in the East. The two survivors were the engineer and the quartermaster. The two alone, barely able to stand on their feet, had navigated the steamer through a typhoon from Sourabaya to Thursday Island. The name of the quartermaster was Michael Scanlon, a native of Limerick.

"It was me old belt me sister of the Ursulines made me for lying out in the bogs that kept me at the wheel," said Mike.

Si returned the paper and replaced the wallet in Mike's belt.

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"Better take it easy till your hand's better," was all he said, though his eyes were as eloquent as an Irishman's tongue.

SI WAS anxious about his dories. He had two more to pick up; thick weather had hidden them. All the afternoon he had been dropping down from windward and then beating back on his search. They were either lost or sunk. The *Annie* flapped her sails and nosed to and fro over the waters trying to gather in her brood.

At nightfall, marked merely by a sudden dimming of the gray clouds, too heavy to be pierced by the sunset, they picked up Billy's dory. Billy and his dory mate had been laying on their oars for Si to find them, but had drifted with the tide.

"Seen anything of Mike?" called Si.

"Away to west'ard last time. Lost him in the last squall."

Billy's trawls had poor luck. A few cod lay on the bottom of his dory. These were thrown on deck and the dory lifted up on the tackles.

Si was now worried. According to his reckoning he should have come on Mike's dory before Billy's, but Mike's dory was manned by Tony who was too old, too resigned to the fatalities of his calling to resist an utterly unpredictable and never in the wrong Irishman.

Mike had soon made friends with all on board. Si had told of the cholera ship, and besides the credit of this Mike earned the respect of the men by his quickness in picking up the points of sailing, the handling of a dory, the setting and hauling of trawls. He was forever asking questions, and from one answer he could guess at much. He was good company for awhile.

But black moods are always close to the surface cheeriness of the Irish. Mike was beginning to find fishing a dull life and lacking in "divarsion." At times he became argumentative, critical, even abusive. The fishing had not been good; Mike thought there was something the matter with the way they fished. The fish were too clever for them. Perhaps the fish had got tired of that kind of bait. He told how the Irish salmon were quick enough to recognize the flies of the English anglers. He knew he was right because the Irish originally were Phœnician fishermen.

His interminable arguments, his topsy-turvy logic, his claim that he had read in a book by a Trinity College man that the Irish were the descendants of that fine old fisherman, Noah, and that the British and the new Britishers were mere imitative landlubbers, soon began to weary the crew of the *Annie*. They had not the mental agility to keep pace with Mike.

So, distrustfully, Si sailed through the evening, with all hands on the lookout and his conch blowing, burning flares as the darkness came to try and pick up the dory of a man who was certain he knew more about fishing than the whole North Atlantic fleet.

Around nine o'clock a flare answered the *Annie's*. It was far to the eastward. The dory was miles from where she should have been. Si angrily questioned Tony when they came alongside and was not at all mollified by the dory full of cod up to the men's knees.

"That —— Irisher," said Tony, as he crawled on to the *Annie*.

"Tony wanted to lay on the oars when we lost sight of yer, but I thought it better to keep going and pull where the weather looked clear," explained Mike, cheerily.

"Didn't yer compass tell yer you were going too far east?"

Tony took the small dory compass from the locker of the dory as it was hauled inboard on the tackle.

"Compass ee no good. Alcohol dry out and water get in. Needle all rusted."

Tony went below to mug up on coffee. The old man was too weary to explain further how the Irishman had taken command. Si understood, however, and began abusing both while the dory was being stowed and the fish shovelled into the hold.

"It wasn't for me to be sitting still doing nothing," answered Mike, restive under criticism.

"A fisherman would. Tony had no right to listen to yer, an old Banker like him. You're a —— bog-trotting greenhorn, risking men's lives. Don't raise yer fist or you go down into the hold."

Barking at each other the two men passed aft, Si to look at his chart and Mike to justify himself. The pugnacity denied to his fists had gone to his feet. He was dancing on his toes. Si ordered the schooner brought into the wind to tack west. The deck leveled and changed its slant.

"I take that from no man," Mike was

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shouting as the schooner heeled close hauled into the seas.

Mike lost his balance, his right foot itching to kick some one, crashed into the compass box through the glass, tearing the card, smashing the gimbals and the needle.

The men on the foresail and the jib, the men lashing the dories came aft at the cry of Si that the compass was smashed. Even Mike was stilled by the silence that followed as he extracted his boot from the box which held it like a trap. The light, undamaged, showed him the wreckage he had caused. The schooner, navigated by dead reckoning, by men who trusted to instinct and fumblings over a chart rather than to exact observation, carrying only an old sextant which Si never used and an uncertain ship's clock nailed on the cabin wall, was deprived of her sole instrument of precision, her compass.

"Any court would acquit me if I threw you overboard," said Si, and a growl from his men backed him.

"Go below. Not forward. Go to my cabin. I don't want bloody murder in my focsle."

Mike, weary and weakened from his long day in the dory, obeyed without a word.

Si immediately ordered all the dories to be searched for their compasses. The dories packed in nests of six each side of the waist were hoisted out or lifted till the men's hands could grope for the little glass covered boxes that were their assurance of a course when away from the schooner.

"Seem all dry, Si," cried a man as he shook a couple and the needles rattled within.

The alcohol was gone from all of them. Si could not remember when he had last attended to them. Two had their glasses broken and one was missing. There was not a trustworthy one in the lot. Their cards had rotted, their needles were rusted, the *Annie* could not trust to any help from her dory compasses.

"Stow the mainsail and we'll lay to for the night," said Si. "Can't do nothing till we get a peek at the sunrise or a star or summat."

The mainsail was stowed, the wheel lashed and under her foresail and jib the *Annie* was left to herself for the night. Her lights were burning clear and there was no fog necessitating a man on deck to blow her conch. Gales had been ridden out that way before with all hands sleeping below for they knew the *Annie* could be trusted.

Si went to his cabin followed by all hands for a consultation over the chart. Mike had turned in with his face to the side. He did not stir as the crew invaded the cabin, and Si spread the big canvas-backed chart over the little table that he lowered from a hook on the mast.

"I guess we're just about here. We had tacked east, making about ten knots on that tack and was going about when I fetched the dory. Wind was steady nor' by west—"

"How are you going to tell if it shifts, Si—without a compass?" said Billy.

"You can tell by the sea," answered Si with full admission of Billy's right to question. "When we was coming east the sea was running with the wind. Wind ain't likely to go west the way the glass is."

This was debatable and every man's opinion was of equal value. Some opined that at this time of the year the wind was likely to go round with the sun right smart.

"Well, we got the sea to tell us, ain't we?" said Si. "So long as the sea hits us a p'int on the starboard bow we're heading west. If it hits us on the port bow we're heading east."

The weather-worn faces stared down at that old food-and-tobacco-stained chart, with its land far to the left, its dots of their ports and home towns, its contour lines of shallows and banks, its myriads of small figures and letters indicating soundings and the state of the sea's bottom. There were pencillings of old courses heading for the red spots of lights round harbors, but Si could draw no line of certainty now. The compass rows meant nothing. Its points were mockeries, parallels of latitude and meridians of longitude were meaningless. The only bearings the *Annie* had were the fluctuant waves and the fluttering vane at her masthead.

"Better have a watch on deck case the wind does shift," said Si.

"I'll take it," said Billy.

"Watch the sea, I'm telling yer. The sea don't shift as quick as the wind. Then if there ain't no sun tomorrow we can steer by soundings. Keep yer nose lifted too, lad. I smelt forest fires to-day. You ought to be able to tell a land wind and that smoke come from Maine."

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The men went on deck to go forward and turn in. Si looked at the sleeping Irishman whom he had forgotten. He was about to tell Mike to go forward and get his supper till he saw crumbs in the bunk and he knew that Mike had gone to the forecastle through the hold while all were on deck looking for the dory compasses. Si was equally certain Mike had not slept through the argument over the chart. The wonder was he had not joined in.

SI WAS out before daylight. There was no definite dawn, merely a gradual lightening, a slow separation of water from sky, the drawing of the lines of spars and rigging on the emerging silver of the clouds, the vague beginning of a sunless day. He looked up at the vane streaming across his deck.

"Wind don't seem to have shifted," he remarked to Billy.

"Sea ain't," said Billy.

Si and Billy then took the lead and Si heaved it over the bows. It came up at about seventy fathoms, and the fat at its base, which Si had rubbed in, brought up a stucco of gray mud and fine sand.

"What I figgered," said Si, confidently. "We ain't drifted much. If we keep on this tack with that vane so we'll make Highland Light 'fore evening. Get yer breakfast and some sleep."

Si went below to have another look at his chart. He was sure he was somewhere around forty-one forty and sixty-eight thirty.

"Where are we?" said Mike who had slipped out of his bunk.

"There," said Si, putting his forefinger nail on the little sounding figures marking eighty fathoms with the letters indicating gray mud and fine sand somewhat to the south.

"Ye mane to tell me you can find yer way by scraping along the bottom as I heard ye tell last night?"

"Sure. Done it afore. Nawthing to it. Get aft for yer breakfast, Mike."

Last night's animosity seemed to have been forgotten. Mike sat to breakfast in the forecastle but had tact enough to ask no questions or interpose any suggestions.

He was singularly silent all that forenoon. He watched the men taking the soundings; he took part in scanning the sea for ships but when he saw smoke to the northeast he let some one else call it. He jumped forward on to the bows with the rush of men when the sounder made the startling announcement that the water had shallowed to sixty fathoms. Si had been predicting the soundings from his chart. He had expected them to go deeper; he had been expecting the call of eighty fathoms.

Bewildered by this discrepancy between his submarine reckoning and actual observation once more, Si went below to interrogate his chart. He found a sixty fathom mark away to the south.

"It's all right, boys. Must ha' come a bit south with the ebb. After this we'll go to seventy, ninety-five, maybe a hundred, till we hit the fifties round Pollock Shoal. Then she'll drop suddenly to twenty-eight and we're to home."

Mike stared at the confident old mariner with wonder. He followed him and his men on deck. There was now more smoke to the south and the first smoke sighted was seen to come from a big steamer heading south, probably a tramp from Halifax, if their assumptions of east and south were correct.

"Why don't you signal that steamer yer in throuble? She'd give yer yer bearings," said Mike.

"Ain't got no flags," said Si. "If I had I've forgotten the code. Used to know it when I was in the coast guards, but that's ten years ago."

"Can't ye hoist a distress signal?" said the Irishman. "Maybe she could let you have a spare compass."

"And have her roast me for the price? Nothing doing," was Si's reply.

Mike went forward to the bows to watch the heaving of the lead. He had taken another look at the steamer. He had been about to utter his praise of the New Englander's sturdy self-reliance, of his dollar shaving, but Si was not a man who could be openly flattered. Mike had learned that much and it was a great deal.

"Let me have a thry," he asked at the lead. "It's me won the throwing the weight championship at Knockreany Fair."

The man gave him the lead and Mike threw it with the swing he had learned from watching him.

"Thirteen fathoms," shouted the man when he read the line.

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"Thirteen, thirteen!" echoed bewildered voices along the deck.

" 'Tain't so," cried Si from his wheel, "can't be."

Mike threw the line again as the crew crowded round to watch him. Again the line came in at thirteen fathoms.

"Must be you, Mike. You've Jonahed the sea's bottom," cried Billy Snow, but the rest of the men were serious.

Si came up to the bows to examine the bottom of the lead. This time the fat had brought up coarse sand and shell. He should be in sixty or seventy fathoms over a blue mud bottom on a course approximating northwest by west. Of course he could signal the steamer with a hoisted oilskin, but the steamer was still far away. They might not see it, they might not pay attention to it. Steamers in these waters are apt to regard fishing schooners as nuisances. Besides Si was given to boasting that he was as independent as a hog on ice.

But the business of the soundings was uncanny. The crew began to believe Billy, but without Billy's sense of the fun of it. A Jonah is not to be laughed at. The Irishman had done something, had perhaps fouled the line and not thrown it properly, or in some way had brought upon them the mysterious fatality of the sea which breeds sea superstition.

"Gimme the line," said a man, trying to take it from Mike.

"I can throw it just as well as any of yer," cried Mike, determined to prove he was not at fault.

He swung the lead with enough velocity to prove he was champion sounder of the Atlantic. But he had neglected to see all was clear. The flying line fouled on a pin, the jar came in mid-air, the line parted, and the lead, their sole salvation, disappeared under the waters, free to seek the bottom but beyond their recall.

"He's lost the lead!"

The cry arose from the enraged men and a chorus of imprecations broke over the head of the luckless Irishman.

"Can't see the steamer," shouted Billy, who had run up the rigging to sight her. Trailing rain clouds had blotted out her funnels. He could not see her; she could not see them. His cry from the masthead added terror to the anger of the men. They were alone on the sea without compass or sounding lead. When Si shouted for the Irishman to be brought aft the crew rushed him.

Taken off his guard by the calamity he had caused, Mike was easily thrown from his feet. With his arms pinioned, his legs held, he was carried aft. He answered their threats with curses. The cook shoved a dish-clout into his mouth. Nobody wanted to hear that voice any more. It was the voice of a Jonah. Mike was kicking and struggling like a black fish in a net. His violence begot a worse ferocity, the slowly aroused but more terrible Berserker blood of New Englanders, loosened from restraint.

"Throw him in the hold," cried Si.

"No, overboard, overboard!" shouted the majority.

"Yes, overboard!" cried Tony. "Let heem find hees thirteen fathom. Overboard, and the sea go deep again."

Tony was fervent in his faith. To most of the men it was a specious superstition. Once rid of their genial harbinger of ill luck all would be right with the *Annie*. The sun would come out, the fish would shoal, the sea's bottom would be according to the chart.

HOWEVER, during the struggle aft Mike managed to grip the heavy iron handle of the pump. He pulled it from its socket by the mainmast. Once free with that in his hands he would be dangerous. Superstition and fear drove the men to desperation and speed. With a unanimous hoist they flung him over the side. Ten pairs of arms had tossed him into the air like a ball. He went down into the sea headforemost in one clean deep diving plunge still clinging to his sinker of forty pounds of bar iron.

For a second the *Annie* kept slowly to her business of beating to the north northeast, for that interval even Si's intelligence had slipped from his schooner and his hands relaxed from the wheel. Then suddenly he put down the helm and brought her head into the wind.

"A line and lifebelts!" he cried.

The first line handy was thrown. Men rushed below to snatch at the belts in their bunks. Their common seaman's humanity had reasserted itself. Mike seemed a long time under. Perhaps the pump handle had tangled in his clothes and was holding him to the bottom.

Suddenly Mike appeared as if he were

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shot out of the water. He was visible to the waist before he sank back when he swam easily and shouted to them with actual hilarity.

"Never mind the belts, boys, just the line!" he cried.

In a moment he caught the line and was hauled inboard. He was chilled but grinning, and he shouted, not with anger, but with the ringing voice of a champion.

"It ain't more than three fathoms. I hit the bottom and kicked meself up. Our old diving thrick. See here."

He opened his fists which they saw he had kept closed even when hooking himself into the bight of the line. His hands were full of coarse sand and gravel.

"Sand and gravel and three fathoms?" cried Si amazedly. "By jumping heck we're over Cultivator Shoal, the only three fathom mark on the chart. Boys, we've come back over Georges, unless, unless—"

He looked round at the grim gray seas, the dull sky, wondering for a moment if he were not close inshore somewhere and a fog bank hiding the land. But the day, though dull, was clear, the squalls intermittent. He could now see the steamer coming closer, and the other steamer to the south he could recognize as a cutter. The only land he was near was the sea's bottom three fathoms below his drifting, almost derelict vessel. The shallows of Cultivator Shoal northwest of Georges Bank.

"We was going east instead of west," he murmured.

"I knew you were," said Mike. "But you're all such clever ——, I wanted to see how you'd get along."

"Then you're a better sailor than I took you for," said Si.

"That's what I've been thrying to tell you all," said the Irishman.

Mike was allowed to go forward to change his clothes in the forecastle. The men gave way to him with an admiration that was as much superstition as their former desire to drown him. Perhaps that Irisher did know something they did not. They followed Si down to the cabin where on the tantalizing chart he pointed out the little contour marked Cultivator Shoal with soundings from seven to three fathoms and the bottom of sand and shell.

"Wind must have slewed right round," said Si. "Maybe when we were below. We was just going the very opposite we thought and the sea wouldn't help us. It wouldn't get choppy when the wind veered a hundred and eighty degrees.

There were loud voices on deck. Ready for any kind of mischance now, Si hurried on deck to meet Tony running aft. The little old Portuguese was stuttering, swearing through his bad teeth, almost wholly inarticulate in his fragments of two languages.

"He —— of feller. Mala pash. I find heem drinking dees."

Tony held up the missing dory compass and pantomimed the draining of its alcohol by lifting it to his lips. The Irishman appeared. Calm, clean, dry and warmly clad in his shore clothes.

"Yes, I took it, sorr. I needed a drink sometime. I didn't think that water wouldn't agree with them—"

He checked his flippancy for Si looked as impressively murderous as a hanging judge. The old man did not move, did not raise his voice, but stood rooted to the deck with just his hand raised to restrain his crew.

"If you take my advice," he said, "you'll go below till I put yer on board that hooker or that cutter, anywhere till we're shut of yer."

"Why, what's the matter wid you all? Didn't I find out where you were? A drop of drink ain't going to stand between us. Yer all fine fellers, and we'll get along now we've had a bit of throuble to make us friends."

He was his old blarneying self, warmed by the contents of the compass and restored to his self-respect by his dive to the bottom.

"Hoist summat to catch that cutter," said Si dourly. "Hello, that steamer's British. Maybe they need a quartermaster."

Mike looked at the tramp. She and the cutter were signalling. The tramp flew a British ensign. Mike's assurance deserted him. He approached Si cap in hand.

"Cap'n, don't put me on board that steamer. Don't call your coast guard. That's me old ship, the *Cloncurry*. I deserted her because I hit the second officer for saying we had no discipline in the Irish army. Don't give me up. I'll pay for your compasses. I wanted to see yer find yer way along the sea's bottom. It's grand sailors ye are. I want to be a rale sailor like yez all. You're the only ones can teach me. You're the

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only sailors left on the wide wide sea. Let me stay."

Mike might not have softened the injured and tough old New Englander but that some one sighted a schooner with her dories out. Si climbed the rigging to see a man in a yellow dory hauling in fish The fish were not dog fish for the man was not stunning them on the side but throwing them over his shoulder into the dory. Beyond him were other dories, faint little spots of orange on the silver gray sea and farther away to the east he saw the peaks of a mainsail and recognized its cut.

"It's Enrique Lopez, and on a shoal of cod, too. Getting 'em two on a hook. Out dories!"

Everything was forgotten but the call for fish. The dories were slung out and manned in smart time and pulling away. Mike had gone below for his oilers and was slipping them over his shore clothes.

"You stay on board with me. Cookie, you take Mike's dory."

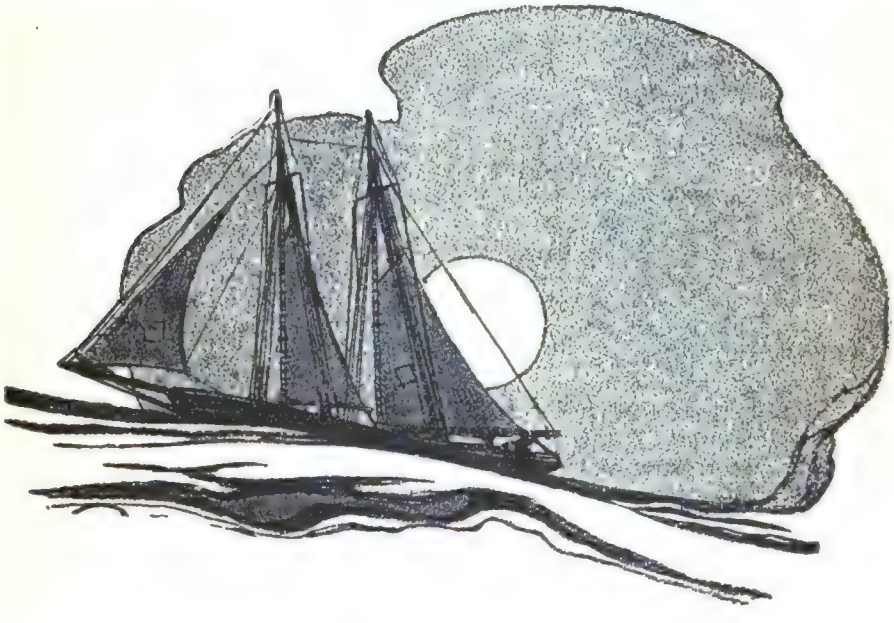
Mike had learned to obey without words. The dory shot over the water. Their hulls disappeared between the waves till they were lost to sight from the deck.

"You can take the wheel, Mike. Keep her well up to windward," said Si, climbing the rigging, paying no more attention to the cutter or the steamer now near enough to show the red paint under her bows.

"Si, do ye mind if I bear off a bit? That old *Cloncurry* is coming in on me course and I'd like to make her shift hers. You know sailing craft have the right of way. That second officer swab will be on the watch and I'd like to give him a little throuble."

"Let the steamer go by. If you want to stay with us remember it's business, not skylarking."

"Ay, ay, Si. But don't forget I'm the only fisherman ever sounded the North Atlantic wid his fisties."



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DAYS of '49

A Six-Part Story

Part V

by GORDON YOUNG

"—the days of old,
The days of gold,
The days of '49."

Author of "Pearl-Hunger," "LaRue of the 88," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form

INTO the town of San Francisco one July noon in the year 1849 rode Dick Hales, ex-Texas Ranger.

"Where can I find Hubert Lee?" was the question he put to the miners and hawkers in the street.

But Lee was out of town.

As Hales sat on his horse looking about at the people and the town, gold mad, drunken, lecherous, shoddy, he heard cries of—"Out of the way, we're Hounds. Hounds are coming," and a party of horsemen led by the infamous and beautiful Dona Elvira Eton rode up to him.

One, Jerry Fletcher, thinking him a Spaniard from his sombrero lifted his whip, crying—

"Out of the way, greaser."

Hales dragged him from his horse and stood over him, menacing.

"Let that man go, señor," said Elvira.

"Take your carrion," said Hales, "where can I find Hubert Lee."

Dona Elvira did not know. Hubert Lee was to her but a name, although she knew his arch enemy, the blustering and prominent Col. Nevinson, very well.

She asked Hales his name.

"Hales?" she said, "I have heard that name before."

Noticing a sudden flicker of interest in Hales' eye she tried to pump him as to whom he sought in reality, but he finding that she had no information useful to him, deserted her for the horse market.

There he sold his horse for two hundred dollars and repaired to the Magnolia, a saloon and gambling den run by Monsieur Max. There day and night, apparently never sleeping, sat Stewart Dawes, the gambler.

Hales walked up to him.

"Deal," he said.

He won three times his two hundred and left with a promise to return.

"Days of '49," copyright, 1925, by Gordon Young.

AT THAT moment a ship was docking at the wharf. It was from the Atlantic, and, although it would soon be deserted to the scavengers to convert into rooming-house, saloon, or brothel its arrival was an event, for it brought the great new mirror that was to adorn the Magnolia, and Mr. Tesla, a gentleman representative of a gambling syndicate, who intended to buy the place from M. Max. With Tesla came his daughter Ilona, and Kredra her Basque serving maid, who considered herself a seeress. On this ship also came John Taylor a young lawyer, and Martin O'Day a little cockney in search of gold.

Taylor disappeared into the crowd, and soon, by luck, got into conversation with Judge Deering, a champion of law and order in a city of bandits. The judge took him as his business partner.

The little cockney went to the Magnolia where he was immediately treated to the sight of Stewart Dawes shooting a card sharper. Soon he found himself talking to Hubert Lee who had just arrived from the mines. Lee told him that before he could be a miner he needed five hundred dollars' worth of outfit and a partner.

Just then Lee was whisked off by a friend who told him that Col. Nevinson was trying to outdo him in a business deal, and O'Day bumped into a large, good-natured drunken miner. After some talk these two agreed to become partners and went off to the room of Bill Burton, the miner. But Burton had no money and O'Day was at a loss to know where it was coming from. That night he stole out of the room, filled a bag with street dust and washers and went back to the Magnolia.

As he entered there was a report and a flash. When the crowd separated Hubert Lee lay dead on the floor and Nevinson stood over him with a smoking revolver. Beside him stood the cadaverous Bruce Brace, a member of the cowardly society of Hounds and his constant bodyguard.

O'Day walked up to the table of Dawes. There

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Dawes was arguing with a young Spaniard, José de Sola.

"Change your bet," said Dawes.

"Señor, I weel not," said José, and Dawes found himself looking into the barrel of a gun. He dealt to the Spaniard and the little cockney, who had crept up and laid his bag on the tray. O'Day won and crept back to his room.

IN THE meantime Nevinson was at the house of Dona Elvira, telling her about his fight with Lee. But she was not interested. This strange iron-faced stranger, Hales, interested her and she wished to find out who it was that Lee knew and Hales wanted. If she could find out she would enlist Ferdinand, a homeless singing vagabond, whose life she had once saved, and who was, therefore, her devoted slave, to draw Hales into an entanglement with her.

She discovered that there was an Anna Hales who had followed the colonel to California. What relation to Hales she was the colonel did not know, but this woman had fallen so low that she now lived in the infested slum, drinking and debauching herself in every way.

Elvira smiled and held her peace.

When the colonel had gone—

"Put me to bed early, Tota," she said to her maid. "I must be fresh tomorrow, for I have many things to do."

BURTON and O'Day were just coming from breakfast with their new wealth when they heard a baby crying. They entered the house from which the sound came. There lay a preacher, his wife and baby all sick and starving.

"How much better to get wisdom than gold," moaned the preacher.

"Ma'am," said Burton to the wife, "here's some money; an we'll get some folks up here ta help ya pretty soon."

He ducked backward and out, and hurried off toward the center of the town, the Plaza.

"There's a parson an' his wife an' baby starvin' back there," cried Burton when he arrived.

The miners gathered round anxious to give money for their help. Thus Ezekial Preble and his family were helped back to health by the miners, and Preble started about the city denouncing sin.

IN THE Magnolia, Hales stood by José de Sola at the Dawes table. Hales and the Spaniard were friends. Though Hales had fought in the Mexican war he had lived in California for many years and had learned to like Spaniards. Hales had once stopped, when travelling, at the rancho of José's sweetheart. He had spoken a good word for José to the girl's hostile parents, and had later traded a horse from the young Spaniard for a fine revolver. He was now trying to buy or win this back, without success.

Having failed he turned to the gambling table.

"I'll tap your bank," he said to Dawes.

He won, leaving Dawes bankrupt. Hales offered to bet the whole thing on one card if the Magnolia would bank its game. Dawes walked off. He returned with Ilona Tesla, who in the absence of her father, the Magnolia's new proprietor, was prepared to take the responsibility. Hales won.

"I'll play it all," he said.

But just then Tesla hurried on the scene to drag his daughter away. With him came Col. Nevinson; Tesla just returned in time to prevent a gun-fight between Nevinson and Hales and José, the two latter, the colonel said, having insulted him. "Be here at one o'clock and I will have the money for you," said Tesla to Hales.

When he was alone a negro boy brought him a note from Dona Elvira saying that she had news for him. He waited on her at her apartments. She talked with him, trying to gain information about Anna Hales, his sister, as he said. But *he* forced the information that she had sunk to the lowest part of the Spanish quarter, out of Elvira, and then he left. When he had gone Elvira called her servant and told him to find Anna Hales.

Hales went to the Magnolia for his money. There he met Tesla and told him that José was ready for a fight with any gringo he might see, because his brother Don Esteban had recently had a lot of miners steal his horse and whip him. Don Esteban's friends and relatives, especially José and Don Gil Diego, were out to find the culprits, and would not rest until they had succeeded.

When Tesla had gone Dawes came up to Hales and asked for a loan, implying that he had cheated on the deal to make Hales win from the Magnolia.

Hales knocked the furious gambler down and went to return the money to Tesla.

Tesla was telling his daughter of a ranch of Col. Nevinson's, El Crucifijo, to which he was taking her out of the city.

That night Hales stood at the bar.

"Turn round, Mr. Hales," said the bartender without looking up.

Hales whirled about; his gun blazed three times. Other guns spoke.

When the smoke had cleared Hales and José were standing over several dead Hounds who had been killed in their attempt to assassinate Hales.

José had killed Bruce Brace and Jerry Fletcher.

Next day Anna Hales was brought to Dona Elvira Eton. She was drunk and helpless. Under the scheming talk of Elvira she seemed to repent of her old ways.

At the same time Hales, on the portico of the Parker House, was trying to persuade José to come with him to the mountains to help the travelers into California.

"No, señor," said José, "I must catch the men who took Don Esteban's horse."

"Be sure you kill the right men," said Hales.

"Kill?" said José. "A dead horse does not feel the branding iron. They will live until God blesses them with death. *Mediante Dios!*"

AS JOSÉ sat there, Benito, a servant of his family's, passed by. José joined him. He and Benito rode off toward the Cowden rancho, El Crucifijo, to join Elvira's servant Ferdinand. This ranch was the same ranch to which Ilona Tesla had gone. It belonged to Col. Nevinson, but was claimed by Elvira and Ferdinand.

AT THE same moment Col. Nevinson, Ilona, her father and Kredra were arriving at El Crucifijo. Here lived Ferdinand and Pedro, a boy devoted to him. Ferdinand talked to the amusement of all but the colonel until he heard Kredra swearing in Basque. He rushed into the kitchen.

"You are one of my people," he cried, "I have not heard my own tongue since my vengeance

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of twenty years ago exiled me. Who is this girl?"

"She is a granddaughter of the benefactors of our people, the de Ruz family."

Thus Ferdinand became Ilona's slave.

The colonel called for a horse named Prince, about whom there was some mystery and who bore the de Sola brand, and rode off. With him rode Mr. Tesla and the colonel started to propose for the hand of his daughter in marriage. Interruptions forced their arrival in San Francisco with the question unspoken.

That afternoon Col. Nevinson went into Baer's saloon. The Hounds for revenge on account of José's part in the saloon fight were cleaning all the Spaniards out of the city. A man named Tucks sent for the colonel. He was groaning with pain and showed the colonel where the de Solas had branded him, for he was one of those who had stolen Don Esteban's horse. The Hounds rushed forth to kill all Mexicans.

In the Magnolia, Hales was asking Judge Deering to find and care for his wayward sister. Mr. Tesla was talking to them. A shot, obviously meant for Hales came through the door. It hit Tesla. He fell down dead.

Hales and John Taylor, Anna Hales' younger brother, rode to inform Ilona.

She, Ferdinand and Kredra rode to the city.

"Who did it?" said Ferdinand.

"That gambler Dawes," said Kredra, an occult glint in her eye.

Ferdinand went to Dawes' room, but Dawes was gone.

After hearing the sad news, and quarrelling again with Hales the colonel went to see Elvira. She insulted Ilona and he struck her and left her to nurse a vicious hate for him.

He found the city sick of bloodshed and arresting the Hounds who had murdered the Spaniards. He heard Judge Deering refuse to allow them to be hanged without trial. A committee of men went to arrest the colonel as a man identified with the Hounds. He took them to see Tucks' wounds and they released him as justified.

Elvira sent for Ferdinand.

"Apple of the Gibbet," she said, "why didn't you tell me that Col. Nevinson had a woman at my rancho."

"*My* rancho, you mean," answered he. "Because from now on I am my own man. No longer shall I dance at your word. I have served you long enough."

Elvira was furious.

Then the door opened, and Hales stood there.

"What do you want?" asked Hales.

"Anna is here and Col. Nevinson is the man who ruined her," said Elvira.

But Hales saw through her.

"If you want your colonel killed you'll have to do it yourself." he said. "I'll see that my sister is taken care of." And he left her with Ferdinand.

OUT of San Francisco, where they had liberated the arrested Hounds; away from the de Solas; away from Col. Nevinson who had offered five thousand dollars for their heads, rode Hales.

He came to Fan Fare Bar, a mining camp, where he found the miners were engaged in the trial of Benito and Lucita, José's fiancée. She had run away from home, and with Benito had set out to find her lover, but the miners had captured them and were trying them for the theft. Hales managed to save Lucita, but the miners hanged Benito.

Hales found a temporary home for Lucita at the home of Mrs. Gubbins, the hardy wife of a miner. Then he went to the main saloon of the place, Fred's house.

Fred's partner was a man named Black Perry who looked sullenly at Hales.

Hales received a letter from Judge Deering telling him that his sister was in the care of Mrs. Preble, the preacher's wife, and that he had succeeded in buying El Crucifijo, for him, which did not really belong to Col. Nevinson at all.

As he was reading the letter he sensed danger. He glanced around and saw Black Perry, a gambler and the bartender all creeping towards him. Two shots from Hales and Perry and the gambler were dead. He held the bartender for evidence.

The miners hanged the bartender.

A SMALL herd of lean long-horned wild cattle edged cautiously out of the trail on the bluff above the river and paused, peering and sniffing as they looked up and down the valley, and across into the camp. They were light tough cattle, used to feeding on parched grass and hunting their own water. They stared uneasily, then swung about, turning on the trail, meaning to go back. There was a headlong rush of two horsemen at their flanks, the shrill *ya-il* of the *vaqueros*, and the cattle bolted down the steep trail, stumbling, sliding, falling.

The two small wild, nearly black *vaqueros* followed recklessly, throwing up merry yells.

Their hair was long, untrimmed; their heads were bound with bright cloth; they wore high crowned wide-brimmed hats, strapped under their chins, buckskin breeches, with heavy leather bound around their legs. Each man carried a knife in his right legging.

The saddle trees they used were little more than bare wood and rawhide, with a high knob horn. The seat was softened by hides strapped across it. The stirrups were wide, thick, of heavy wood, and the men rode with straight legs.

Their *reatas* were of plaited hide. Hair ropes, however, were used for picketing, as coyotes chewed leather. The first toy that the son of a *vaquero* had was a *reata*.

The two *vaqueros* sent the cattle at a gallop through the camp and bunched them in the butcher's rough corral. They reined up, saluted the Americano butcher good-naturedly, and waited, grinning. They could not speak English. They brought cattle and took away gold. They did not know

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how much gold; but they took it to Don Ramon. The barter was as rudely primitive as that of hill tribes of negroid savages who brought down goat's flesh to exchange with coast dwellers for salt.

Hales came to them. They answered him eagerly and, though half or nearly all Indian, they were polite.

Yes, Don Ramon Arnaz lived some thirty miles off, toward the sea; yes, he had a wife and children; yes, they had heard of Don Miguel Carrillo; yes, they would take the señor and the señorita to the rancho. And God must love a gringo, they said, to make him look so like a Spaniard and speak so well the tongue!

They became excited at the mention of José de Sola. Ah, Mother of Heaven, care for him. He was dead!

"José de Sola, dead!"

"*Si, señor*, it was the truth. Don Ramon himself had said it!"

There had been a fight with Americanos. Don José had been killed. His head had been cut off to be shown to some gringo who had offered much money for it.

Time meant little to them. Haste was something unknown in California until the cursed gringos came with it. The *vaqueros* camped that night by the butcher's corral, slept under the *serapes* and on their horse blankets, and the next morning they were up early, ready to start with Hales and Lucita.

It was a long ride. No one spoke of Don José. The *vaqueros*, with the instinct of birds and the horsemanship that sent them scrambling over rough places like wild goats, cut across country, through timber, down hills that had no trails but those of wild animals, came out into nearly treeless valleys through which round-topped hills billowed; then, near the end of the day, reached Don Ramon's *rancho*.

The house was an oblong one story adobe, thatched with *tules* and mud. The floors were earth, partly covered with worn mats. The corral was near the house and by the corral the *ramada*, a shelter with a roof only where the *vaqueros* loafed and camped. There were no trees by the house, no vegetation. It was like many of the more remote *ranchos*.

The Californians, particularly those at a distance from the cities, were not sybarites; they lived in the saddle, ate beef, held a rodeo twice a year and slaughtered cattle for hides and tallow; they were not educated but they were gentlemen, on times of holiday they dressed richly and preserved always something of the manners of Old Spain. When the family went on a visit to another *rancho*, or rather on a tour of visits, the laces, the combs, the dresses, the mirrors. all that was valuable, were packed in a heavy chest and taken on the wagon. The ranch house was left open, unwatched. Few of these ranch houses had doors. In bad weather the doorway was hung with hides. Visitors were always welcome; whether they remained over night or for a month, they were welcome. The simple faith of this pastoral people was that what God has given, the guest may use.

DON RAMON was a tall straight man with a gray beard. His sombrero weighed about six pounds. He wore a yellow sash and velvet jacket. The silk and velvet were not cleaner than much dust and wear usually leaves such things, but they were silk and velvet; and he had others, fresher, more fine, for festival days.

He came from the house as the party drew near, and took off his sombrero as he saw that Lucita was such a one as his own daughters. His head was bound with a scarf. He was patriarch among a cattle-raising people.

Hales dismounted and removed his own sombrero.

"Señor Arnaz, this young girl in madness has run from her parents to be with the man she loves. She is Señorita Lucita—"

When Hales had finished, Don Ramon helped Lucita from her horse and took her to the doorway, calling upon his wife who was already there, listening.

He came again to Hales and said:

"It is true, señor, that one of the de Sola brothers has been killed. I know both of them. Which one is dead I do not know. The first report said that both were dead, but I am now sure that one lives.

"As my own daughters, to all of whom God has given worthy husbands, she will be treated. The gringos, señor, steal my cattle and horses. They drive my cattle into mining camps where men are hanged for stealing a shovel, but where all men eat stolen beef that is mine. The de Solas, señor, now take what men they can find to ride with them, and many *vaqueros* are

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among them, and some are thieves. Don Esteban from the first did not care. Don José, señor, soon ceased to care about what cannot be helped, and Don Diego, señor—he whose horse it was the gringos stole—Don Gil is a man without mercy. Punishment be upon the heads of gringos who began the robbery! While breath lives in either of those brothers, he will seek Neveenson to brand him!"

"To brand—that is terrible," said Hales. "To kill, yes. But to brand—that shouldn't be, señor!"

"They *whipped* Don Esteban, señor! Why? Because he did not choose to sell a horse which was not his own! He would rather have been killed. Mother of Heaven, if gringo or any man, señor, though he be King of Spain, should lay a whip upon my back—"

Don Ramon became so swollen with passion at the thought that he could not say more. His dark eyes gleamed terribly. Then he apologized, saying he knew of Señor Hales, had heard good words of him from one who had only curses for gringos; and that the coming of Señorita Lucita showed how justly had the good words been spoken.

He took Hales into the house for a glass of wine and much talk.

The old Californian did not say so in as many words, but he let it be understood that the de Solas had often rested at the remote Arnaz *rancho* and been always welcome.

Hales remained for two days with Don Ramon, then headed northward, returning to trails that led through diggings, moving upward toward Sacramento; and a few days later he entered the wild and gloomy camp of Diamond Gulch.

He had not been in the camp three minutes before learning that Col. Nevinson, greatly elated by the news of Don Esteban de Sola's death, had passed that way a few hours before.

XII

DIAMOND GULCH was so called because a party of miners had paused one noon-day, months before, in its dark and gloomy shadows to make tea and fry bacon.

"Boys," said one of them jestingly, "here's a diamond!"

He reached into the water at his feet for a bright pebble. He never picked up the pebble. His hand darted an inch deeper into the water, snatching at a tiny yellow gleam as he shouted—

"Gold, by jingo!"

Tea and bacon boiled and burned on the coals, forgotten. Shovels and pans were tumbled out of packs, and the feverish rattling of gravel began.

Within a week a thousand miners were scattered—or rather, pressed elbow to elbow—up and down the gulch. Claims were only eight feet square, and nearly every one was a rich claim. Within a month five thousand miners swarmed like bees over rotted fruit along the banks.

Stores, hotels, saloons, even bowling alleys appeared. In ten days there had been a full grown camp; then canvas buildings began to be displaced by the thump of hammer and grinding hum of saw. Freighters had brought in lumber.

Diamond Gulch flowered almost over night into one of the richest camps of that rich region; but the wealth of Golconda could not long supply treasures for these *conquistadors* of shovel and pan. Diamond Gulch, toward the close of '49, had fallen almost as rapidly as it rose, and was touched by decay. Soon most of its buildings were deserted, and it rotted like a town stricken with plague.

By the close of September many, even most of the miners had gone, hurrying off after other echoes, seeking pound diggings. Those that remained were washing tailings, that is, rewashing dirt that had passed once through the cradles and sluices. The tailings of some camps were profitably washed two and three times. Anything under an ounce a day was considered very meager in '49.

THERE had recently been in Diamond Gulch a young man who was the correspondent for the *New York Herald;* he was making a tour of the camps, writing his impressions.

One day for a while he watched a party of drunken miners in the El Dorado saloon divide their time and money between the bar and a monte game conducted by a tall, pale, immaculate and immobile gambler, whose features appeared as expressionless as a piece of ivory. His left hand was in a bandage. Some weeks before a bullet meant for his heart had gone through his

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hand, and he had then coolly killed the half-drunken and loss-angered miner.

Even at that, there had been talk of hanging the gambler. Diamond Gulch, losing its distinction of being rich diggings, had in it many restless and discontented men who thought it something of an enviable distinction to make Diamond Gulch known for frequent and quick hangings. But the gambler had very coolly held up his wounded hand and asked with expressionless calm if any man expected him to sit quietly and let the miner take a second shot?

The gambler, though his left hand was useless, continued to deal monte; but much of his luck was gone. His losses were frequent and heavy. But he took them without a flicker of anger or change of expression.

The young correspondent of the New York paper, having his head confusedly filled with impressions that he knew very well he could never get coherently to paper, retired to the empty dining room of the Ohio House, which was quiet at that hour and afforded a table, to write as best he could.

Sometime later he glanced up. A queer little fellow had entered unnoticed and stood at a distance, watching with a kind of eager admiration as the newspaper man's pencil dashed across page after page. He was indeed an odd specimen of a miner, small, young, wearing a slouch hat much too large, boots much too large, a red flannel shirt also too large, and canvas trousers big enough for a man twice his size. He had a cheerful impudent smile, up-turned nose and bright friendly eyes.

"Hello," said the newspaper man agreeably.

" 'Ello yerself."

"What can I do for you?"

"A bloke mus' 'ave a bloomin' lot o' learnin' to write fast as wot yer can!"

"What would you do if you found a nugget so big you couldn't lift it? You 'd scramble and scratch pretty fast, wouldn't you?"

"Not me, I udn't. I'd yell f'r Bill."

"Who's Bill?"

" 'E 's my pardner. Yer hought ter see Bill. 'E 'd myke three o' you. Me an' Bill we 're rich. We ain't been 'ere long. We jus' bought a claim wiv a good cabin down the river. We 're stayin' the winter. Washin' tailin's. Bill 'e says we 'd better stay where there's hounce diggin's than go chasin' habout. An' Bill 'e knows. 'E 's a '48-er, Bill is. I come to camp f'r some candles. Saw you writin'. Wisht I c'd write. Bill 'e won't write f'r me. Says 'e can't spell perlite. I wisht I could write," and the small cockney looked wistfully at the pad of scribbled sheets.

"What would you write?"

"Letter."

"Who to?"

"Miss Tesler down in Frisco."

"Oh. Do you know her! I've heard of her. Her father was killed."

"I 'eard it. I want 'er ter know if she needs some money she c'n 'ave wot I got. Me an' Bill 's rich. She was good ter me onct."

"Look here, you dictate that letter. I'll write it."

"Will yer, 'onest! An' fix it up to sound heducated?"

"Sure."

"Yer a good un!" said the cockney, sliding eagerly on to a bench across from the man of letters.

"Go on. Tell me what to write."

"I'll give yer the hidee. You myke it sound good."

The little cockney wrinkled his forehead and put his head between his hands, laboring for words. He, who was talkative as a magpie, became almost tongue-tied at the thought of having what he said put on paper. With effort he began:

"Miss Tesler, dear ma'am, I ain't never learnt 'ow ter write, but I want yer to know— 'Ow 's that?"

"Fine!"

The cockney gazed absorbedly at a rafter, and presently losing some of his self-consciousness began to rattle along eagerly, saying to Miss Tesla that what he had was hers because there was plenty more that he and Bill could dig out.

The newspaper man had to slow him down time and again, for this man of the pen, being a born newspaper man, realized that the world was crowded with people who could write as well as himself, but that not often could one get down on paper the rich crisscross jargon, a mingling of city slums and camp slang, of this wise street-bred youngster, who was still nearly awed by the mountains, topped with pines, washed by whirling rivers. The newspaper man guessed, too, that if Miss Tesla had

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ever been interested in this little fellow that she had been interested because of his odd speech and unique alertness; so now, as nearly as possible, his words were put down literally.

"—nights the wind it goes through the big trees like somethin' wearin' of soft floatin' clothes wot don't catch on the branches, an' it sounds big an' soft. Sometimes deers come right down where we can see 'em—"

"Just a minute—all right. I've caught up. Go on."

"I nearly forgot somethink. That gam'ler Dawes 'e 's up 'ere. Honly 'e calls 'isself somebody else. Mr. Clifton. I've kept way from 'im, cause Bill 'e says if 'e 's goin' by 'nother nyme an' was to see me an' knowed I knowed 'im, 'e might shoot me. Then Bill says 'e 'd 'ave to break 'is bloomin' 'ead for 'im. Bill says 'e udn't mind breakin' his bloomin' 'ead, but 'e 'd 'ate orful to 'ave ter bury me. Bill says diggin' of a grave is jes' so much waste labor. Bill 'e 's the fines' man on hearth. Stryght! 'E stays away from camp so 'e won't want ter play monte. 'E mykes me lug the grub, 'cept when it's too 'eavy—"

"Tell her some more about the mountains. She 'll like that."

"I didn't know mountins got so big as wot they are 'ere, an' the river at night when yer harf asleep it jes' talks like a foreign girl wiv a sweet mouf, honly yer can't un'erstand 'er, but I wisht yer could. Bill 'e was sick onct but 'e said I was such a bum cook 'e 'ad ter get well 'cause I'd 'ave killed 'im sure wiv my grub. I like Bill. We quarrel hall the time—"

"Fine!"

"Now," said the eager little cockney, squirming about into an attitude of tense attention, "yer wrote wot I said like I'd 'ave done if I c'd write, did yer?"

"Sure."

"Read me it!"

"My dear Miss Tesla. Unfortunately my scholarship does not permit me to address you in the language of the pen, but I have made the acquaintance of a gentleman who numbers writing and reading among his few accomplishments—"

"Gorblimey, that's wot I'd sy if I knowed 'ow! She'll like that letter fine!"

"What name shall I sign?"

"Martin Ho'Day. We come on the ship tergether, me an' 'er."

XIII

HALES entered Diamond Gulch and stopped at the Ohio House for dinner. He learned at once from a barroom full of angered and half drunken men that there had been a robbery of more than a thousand dollars in dust, and something near a hundred dollars in gold coin which Col. Nevinson had paid the night before.

Gold coins were about as rarely seen in the camps as women, as good women. If anything coins were the more rare.

Col. Nevinson had stopped with his party for the night. He had been greatly excited over the news which had reached him, a day or two previously, that Esteban de Sola had been killed, his head cut off, taken to Sacramento and put on exhibition.

If this were true the colonel would pay, gladly sir! the reward he had offered! He had drank a good deal and talked much. The de Sola gang, sir, had their tails between their legs. They wouldn't be up around these mines anyhow. Horsemen, he said, could not move around through the mountains easily enough to satisfy such cowards as the greasers. They, sir, wanted to ride where they could run easily!

He had bought champagne and paid for it in gold coin. The coins were passed from hand to hand and examined in the candle light; after which they had been returned to Mullins, the proprietor, a gawky, excitable backwoodsman who had turned tavern keeper. Mullins later put them with a pouch of gold dust under his mattress. This was more a gesture toward security than a precaution.

The colonel and his friends had left the first thing in the morning, and Mullins went about his business without thought of his gold until Mr. Clifton came down stairs. Mr. Clifton ran the monte game in the El Dorado, just across the street, but boarded and roomed at the Ohio House, which was a two story building anchored to the side of a hill.

Mr. Clifton was pale, quiet, aloof, and regarded by Mullins as a gentleman.

"Too bad yuh had that headache last night," said Mullins. "The colonel he was shore interestin'. Ever see the colonel?"

"No," said Mr. Clifton quietly. "I never had that pleasure."

"Say, I'll just show yuh somethin' the

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colonel he left. The boys was all took by surprize."

Mullins went from the barroom and returned at a frantic gallop, yelling—

"Boys, I been robbed! Dust an' coin gone!"

Much excitement followed and a great clattering of tongues.

Mr. Clifton, as usual, took no part in the conversation. He ate his breakfast and went across to the El Dorado. His left hand was still bandaged. He dealt monte with one hand though players or lookout would have to shuffle for him.

Much whisky was drunk by the indignant miners, and Hales, arriving shortly before noon, heard of the robbery before he had washed the dust from his throat.

His arrival was quickly talked of up and down the street, for he wore a sombrero, but wasn't a greaser; and there were some who had heard of him in San Francisco.

It was not long, a few minutes in fact, until Mr. Clifton stated that he had a return of his headache, closed his game and entered the Ohio House without passing through the barroom, where Hales and others, while awaiting dinner, listened to an impassioned orator denouncing the unknown thief; cheer went up at any mention of a rope.

Mr. Clifton went up stairs to his room, which overlooked the street. He closed the door. It was without a lock of any kind. He placed a stool against it so that the stool would offer some resistance if any one pushed against the door. Then he bent down, placing an ear almost against the floor near a crack and listened to the conversation in the barroom below. He took off his coat, folding it carefully, methodically.

Not a shadow of expression crossed his face. He removed the money belt that he wore next to his skin, and quietly removed a handful of gold coins. For a moment he looked about thoughtfully, after which he took up some of his paper-backed novels and began to place the coins, one at a time, here and there among the pages. When all the coins had disappeared, he stacked the novels and tied them, then placed the package in plain sight on the floor. He crouched to the floor with an ear against a crack and listened, but his expression did not change in the slightest at any time. He seemed to have something of the wary, sensitive alarm of a wild animal, and much that resembled its interminable patience.

The miners went stamping into the dining room, and shortly afterward there was a knock on Mr. Clifton's door.

"What is it, sir?" asked the gambler quietly.

"One of the boys said he seen yuh come in. Ain't yuh feelin' spry?"

"Thank you, Mr. Mullins, sir. But I am subject to headaches. At such times I wish to be alone and remain quiet. I will be all right in a day or two. But I find the attack I had yesterday returning."

"Don't feel well 'nough to see a feller f'r a minute, d' yuh?" asked Mullins through the closed door.

"No. Who?"

"Feller named Hales."

"Never heard of him, sir."

"Didn't 'low yuh had. He's askin' 'bout a feller. Gam'ler named Dawes. I told him yuh knowed lots o' gam'lers. He said he 'd like to speak with you."

"I never heard of Dawes," Mr. Clifton replied quietly.

"I'll tell 'im. Bad feller to monkey with, this here Hales so some of the boys was sayin'."

"Pardon me, sir, but I have a severe headache and wish to rest."

"Awright, awright, awright," Mullins answered, and went off, scraping his feet heavily, as if the weight of his boots was about all that he could lift.

THE dining-room was entirely of rough lumber; the tables were planks; the benches were planks. The food was placed on the tables in platters and each man grabbed for what he wanted and helped himself. There were some fifteen or twenty men at the tables, rough, hungry, strong fellows, champing and chewing, their bellies warm with whisky their food-clogged mouths loud with raillery for one another and curses for the thief that had blotted the good name of Diamond Gulch.

Before the meal was half finished they heard the heavy rapid thumping of booted feet running through the barroom. An excited man appeared in the doorway, bawling:

"We got 'im, fellers! Git a rope! We got the thief an' money! Boys bringin' 'im. Git a rope, some o' you!"

Then he turned and bolted out of sight, and the men who were eating forgot food. Knives, with chunks of meat on the points,

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half lifted to the gaping bearded mouths were thrown aside. Oaths were mumbled hastily in surprize; there was a bustling scramble to get legs and feet from under the tables, a stumbling rush for the door.

Hales stood up, paused at the deserted table to finish a cup of coffee, then went into the barroom. It was empty. The men had rushed out of the front door, into the rough dusty street. They stood in a scattered line looking up the street to where a group of men were hurrying toward them, hustling, partly dragging, a little fellow whose voice was loud in protest.

One man with lumbering run came on before. This was Jeb Nelson, storekeeper, a fellow with a beard and bald head. Always he wore a hat, and always well back on his head as if proudly showing his bald forehead.

"Boys, we got 'im!" cried Jeb, puffing. "See here, Mullins!" He cupped his palms under Mullins' nose. "There you are!"

Men crowded about, staring down at the gold pieces, and cursed.

"He come into my place," said Jeb, breathless from running. "Bought some tea an' stuff. Then he said: 'Col. Nevinson ain't the only man what's got real money. Looky here. You fellers got so excited over money—I got some too. Jes' thought I'd show you!' He throwed down a twenty-dollar gold piece!

" 'Where you get this?' I asked him, quiet-like.

" 'I got plenty more,' he said. Then he showed me some more. An' I jes' naturally fell on 'im, an' yelled for Sam Thompson who was in the back room eatin' sardines an' crackers. It's yore money, Mullins!"

"Git a rope fellers!" a drunken man squawked, and the cry was repeated.

"That's shore my money, boys!" said Mullins, plucking at the coins, greedily.

"Diamon' Gulch she don't give no thief time to pray!" said a miner, proudly to Hales.

Some men had unsteadily hurried up the steps into the barroom and came back with two bottles of whisky. He waved both in wavering arms.

"Hoopee! Hang 'im!"

They seemed bloodthirsty and many of them were drunken. Hales looked upon the gathering crowd with disgust. He believed as readily as any that the fellow was guilty. From the time he had left San Francisco until he glanced down into Jeb Nelson's palms he had not seen a gold piece.

And as one sober miner said to him—

"If the only hen egg in camp is stole an' you see yoke on a feller's beard—he 's guilty, ain't he?"

"But how can a man have been such a fool as to show the coins?"

"Pardner," said the resolute and sober miner, "a man what's fool enough to steal somethin' in Diamon' Gulch ain't goin' to display no great amount o' brains no time!"

"Hang 'im!"

"Stop jawin' an' hang 'im!"

The camp of Diamond Gulch was sprawled by a river that ran at the foot of a towering gloomy wall of rock. The men stood in the dusty street, under the high sun, and without a trace of mercy, just as though deaf, glowered at the little fellow who had been thrust forward into their circle; and the drunken men among them lifted an impetuous cry of—

"Hang 'im, the dirty thief!"

This little fellow had not been in Diamond Gulch long. He and a pardner were mining down the river.

"Better' fess up, 'cause we 're shore goin' hang you, an' sudden!" said Jeb Nelson.

He was an odd little fellow, but youth nor oddness made a favorable impression on these outraged miners. His hat had been knocked off. His shirt, his boots, his trousers, were too large. But the little cockney did not appear really frightened. He stared about him in a kind of uneasy trustfulness, as if he knew miners too well to think that they would hurt him. Now and then an eager little hopeful smile broke through his earnestness.

"I never stole nuffin! 'Ones' boys! Me an' Bill kept that gold from wot we 'ad when we bought our houtfits in Sacermento. You jus' hask Bill! I jus' thought I'd show 'im there—" he gestured toward Jeb Nelson—"Col. Nevinson wasn't honly one that 'ad coin!"

A drunken man howled—

"What the ——'s gittin' the matter with this here camp, lettin' a —— thief talk!"

"Feriner at that!"

"I ain't no foreigner—I'm Henglish, I ham! Ask Mr. 'Ales there—I know 'im. You send f'r Bill!. 'E 'll tell yer!"

"Do you know this man?" Jeb Nelson asked Hales.

"No," said Hales, "I do not."

He had no recollection at all of a little

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cockney in a big cap at whom he had glanced for a moment in the Magnolia at the time Miss Tesla appeared to deal monte.

Voices bawled together—

"Hang 'im!"

A rope appeared with a noose on it. Miners frequently fitted the noose and even stretched a man's neck a bit to frighten him into a confession.

"It 's your money, Mullins. You set the rope," said Jeb.

Mullins stepped forward. Men held Martin's hands. Mullins slipped the noose. Drunken hands grabbed the rope and jerked. The little cockney fell and writhed in the dust, choking, pulling at the rope.

"Here! Here!" said Jeb Nelson angrily, shoving the drunken, knocking some of them aside. "We got to do this right. Sam, you climb up there on the porch an' pass the rope."

The Ohio House, being built on the side of a hill, had a frame of studding about ten feet high supporting one side of it.

"Aren't you going to give this man a trial?" asked Hales.

"What does he need of a trial?" asked Jeb. "He 's guilty, ain't he? Ain't he, boys?"

Yells answered that he was, guilty as ——!

"But give him a trial," said Hales. "Get his pardner. Hear what the fellow has to say?"

"We 'll go git his pardner after we hang 'im—an' hang the pardner too!" some one shouted.

"Yes, an' we'll hang you too if you try to monkey!" a drunken man cried at Hales. "This here is Diamond Gulch, feller!"

The rope had been passed over a beam, and men grabbed it. Hales knocked them back, caught the rope, with a fling sent it over the cross piece so that it fell loose upon the ground; and Hales said:

"Look here, give this man a trial! He can't escape. Get his pardner. Hear his story. Be fair! There 'll be as much justice whether you hang him now or an hour later!"

"Aw dry up!" Voices booed and bahed. "Hang you too!"—"This here's Diamon' Gulch, she is!"

"Boys ow don't 'ang me! Send f'r Bill! 'E 'll tell yer. I ain't stole nuffin'! Bill 'e 's a 48-er 'e is! Send f'r Bill!"

Men tried to drown his voice with contemptuous jeering and yowing; they called Hales a greaser, cursed, yelled loudly—

"Diamon' Gulch she don't give thiefs no trial!"

Two or three sober miners had lined up silently by the side of Hales; and Jeb Nelson pushed his hat farther back on his bald head, scratching vigorously.

"Boys," said Jeb, "le' 's get that there pardner. An' if we don't like his story, we'll hang 'em both!"

Wrangling followed. The folly of the drunken admitted of no reasoning, but there were sober and serious men who backed up what Jeb had said.

While this was going on, a pale inscrutible face looked down upon them from an upper window, keeping well back, out of sight.

XIV

JEB NELSON had some trouble in getting a committee to go with him down the river after the pardner, Bill. Nelson knew him slightly. He was a big fellow, might be dangerous. It was thirst, not fear of anybody, that made so many of the men reluctant to go a mile down the river. Jeb called upon the most sober. Hales and three other men marched off with Jeb, leaving Martin O'Day in the shadow of the Ohio House watched over by two men while other miners went trampling into the barroom for further drinks.

"There he is," said Jeb Nelson, and pointed. "We 'll jes' mosey up, quiet-like till we all get 'round him."

They looked ahead to where a big man stood knee deep in icy water, shoveling gravel into a sluice box. As they came near he paused, leaned on his shovel, and regarded them with steady, untroubled, friendly gaze. He was a huge man. It would take many men and a strong rope to swing him.

"Howdy," said Bill Burton, taking out his pipe, feeling for tobacco. Then— "Say, if *you* ain't Dick Hales!"

"Yes," said Hales.

"I seen you in 'Frisco, time you won twenty thousand on the turn of a card. I ain't bet on a card since. Promised little pard I'd lay off monte. You fellows ain't seen anything of a little pee-wee luggin' a sack o' flour down the trail? He went f'r grub."

"Yes," said Jeb Nelson. "We seen him."

"Why, what's wrong?" demanded Burton

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dropping his shovel, stepping from the water toward them. He towered above them and they were not small men. "What's wrong? What's happened to my pard?" He gazed anxiously from one to another, then steadily at Hales. "Tell me!"

"Your pardner," said Hales, "had some gold coins. There are not many in camp, in any camp. Mullins was robbed and the miners thought—"

Burton scowled dangerously. He glanced from face to face, puzzled. Then he laughed, roared with laughter. Echoes struck from the wall of rock that deeply cradled the river and came back mockingly.

"Yo-ho-ho! You fellows took Marty for a thief! Steal? Him? Say, we've lugged them coins up an' down the river diggin's ever since we left Sacramento. We showed 'em to the boys up to Rainbow one day—half the miners there 'd never seen gold coin."

"You still have them, of course?" asked Hales.

"Sure. Always had plenty of dust, an' sort o' kept the coin for good luck. They was part of the first money Marty ever had. He won it off Stewart Dawes—same fellow you had trouble with, I hear, Mr. Hales. I wouldn't want Dawes to know how little pard won 'em. An' he 's here, or was. Marty saw him—"

"Dawes, here!"

"Calls hisself Clifton, or something. You boys come up to the cabin. I'll show you that we got coin."

His stride was twice as long as that of the men with him. He stopped every few steps, turned, waited for them, and talked. To Hales he seemed a true Titan of the Mountains; a massive man, well built, of prodigious strength and generous simplicity.

"——!" said Jeb Nelson aside to Hales. "It 's good you stopped them boys. He ain't no more guilty 'n I am!"

The went to the doorway of the cabin, and Burton entered, saying—

"Crowd in, boys. Crowd in. Lots a room. Guess I'll kick up a fire an' put on the bean pot. Have 'em warm. Little pard 'll be hungry when we come back. . Say, I'll bet you he spluttered when you fellows 'cused him of stealin'! Him steal! Ho oh ho!"

Burton stooped, got down on his knees on the dirt floor, reached under the bunk, groped about—

"I wonder did he take that pouch—it ain't—yes it is, too—here—"

He stood up, shook the pouch, setting up a faint jingle, then drew wide the mouth of the pouch, and tumbled the coins on to the bunk—more coins than had been in Mullins' sack.

"I'll just take these along up to the camp to show the boys," said Burton, scooping them into his hand, thrusting them into his pocket.

Hales was standing outside of the cabin, rolling a cigaret. He felt a sort of inner trembling, like that of a man who has barely escaped from wretchedness, for he, as much as any one, had believed the little cockney guilty of thievery. At that moment across his memory there seemed to come the echo of a thundering voice that had swept with majestical passion over a mob of angered men, reckless men, who too had brought a rope—

"—better ten guilty men live than put to death one innocent—"

BURTON walked by the side of Hales, telling how Little Pard had written to Miss Tesla and why; telling too how, with only bullets and street dust, he had won gold from the gambler Dawes; and also telling of what a great pardner the little cockney had been.

"—lot of blue jays up to Rainbow. Little pard used to feed 'em—had 'em so they'd come right up to him. Made me think of a blue jay hisself, perky and always hoppin' around. The miners up to Rainbow thought the world of him. They get round him an' get him to talkin' of London. Little devil, he never had no money in his life. Don't yet hardly know what money's for. Steal? Him! Rainbow she played out, so we come down here to winter—"

They crossed the river. Its high rocky banks showed how angry it could be when swollen by the winter rains. Hales kept to the foot log, but Burton, in hip boots, waded in, walking easily through the tumbling current.

They came into the street of Diamond Gulch. No one was in sight. They came near the Ohio House. Burton paused, knocked out his pipe against the heel of a boot, straightened up, towering, looked at Hales who had stiffened suddenly.

Burton looked toward where Hales stared,

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and his glance rested on what seemed to be a bundle of clothes dangling under the hotel—like a small scarecrow, or effigy. He gazed, frowning doubtfully. He rubbed the back of a hand across his eyes, and peered.

"Why what—"

He moved a few steps nearer, staring. "Why that can't—why—" In a low dazed voice he said, "Is that—why, they've hanged him!" There was an utter blankness in his eyes as he turned toward Hales, questioningly.

Then half dragging his feet he moved closer, staring fixedly. The pipe dropped from his fingers. He opened his mouth, but did not speak. Again he looked at Hales, and again peered up at the small body.

In the shadow of the gloomy mountains, where a whirling river ran, the miners who would not let a thief talk or have a trial had hanged Martin O'Day, nameless waif of the streets.

Now, overhead, there was the trample of drunken jigging, the sound of fuddled laughter. Burton stared up as if looking through the floor and walls, watching. His eyes went back to the dangling body.

"Why, Mr. Hales, they 've hanged him?"

It was a question, pitifully low, and the look in his eyes was the look of a man who has been greatly injured and can not imagine why.

"Yes," said Hales, "they have hanged him."

Jeb Nelson's voice, and the voices of the miners with him, added curses, pathetic, reproachful.

"But—but—" Burton spoke in a troubled tone, almost blankly, "—but they sent you fellows down to see *me*. It's not like miners to do that—" he lifted his arm, pointing as if wearily—"without a hearin'." His voice deepened—"They 've hanged him—why, they 've hanged my pard!"

His eyes began to glow with the pain that is half anger, and in heavy trampling he turned, wrath gathering upon his body like an aura. Some one was dancing a jig above where the hanged man dangled. Men were laughing.

Burton, with heaving strides, leaped toward the stairs. The boards crackled under his feet. He stopped in the doorway, towering there, glaring fixedly at the crowd room of men that leaned, elbows to bar, that sagged against the walls, grinning, laughing, cheering a drunken fellow who, with toppling lunge and whisky-heavy feet was trying to prove that he could dance.

Eyes fell on Burton. Men who saw him grew abruptly silent. Other men, looking to see what was bringing silence, turned, stared. The drunken miner clattered on for a moment amid the stillness, then felt the chill and stopped.

"You hanged my pard," said Burton slowly, deep of voice. "My little pard."

"He stole Mullins' money!"

"You lie!" Burton thundered.

"We found it on 'im!"

"Show 'im the coin, Mullins!"

"Mullins, show 'im!"

"Mullins, quick—my god he looks crazy!"

"Why," bawled a drunken man, "the dirty little thief, he had the gold!"

Burton's hand went into his pocket and came out. He swung back his fist. His oath was ferocious, and with the shout of "—— there 's *gold!*" he threw, powerfully, a handful of gold pieces straight into the faces of men. Those who were struck cried out, hurt. Others dodged. Men uneasily began to edge far away, stumbling toward the dining room door. Most of them were drunken, none were cowards, but they were guilty; now knew it.

"Why don't you hang me—I've got more—"

Again he threw.

Voices babbled in curses. The men cursed, not him, but themselves, futilely, as they stared, backing off, stumbling. They were not cowards, but they were afraid.

"Say, lissen, pardner," a fellow began, holding out a placating hand.

Burton struck him; then striking, jerking hurling whomever he could reach, rushed upon them.

When Burton came from the barroom he left only wreckage behind him, and some men with cracked heads.

As if Hales did not know, Burton spoke, hoarse with pain—

"They hanged him, my little pard—they hanged him!"

Hales lowered away the rope and Burton received the small body in his arms. His trembling fingers loosened the noose and cast it off. He held the chilled body as he would have held a sick child, and with solemn tramp set off down the river.

Hales, moved by a sense of pity, hurried

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after him, going with him, a mile down the river to the cabin.

Together they dug the grave in stony ground. And when the grave was covered over, Burton went to a large boulder that two men could scarcely have moved. He stooped, grasped it in his arms, straightened, and bore it to the grave for a headstone.

So it was that Martin O'Day was buried where at night the wind goes through the big trees like something that wears soft floating garments that do not catch on the branches, where the mountains stand with eternal vigilance, and the whirling river has the sound of foreign girls babbling with sweet mouths in an unknown tongue.

XV

AFTER they had returned to the cabin, Burton sat for a time on a bunk, repeatedly running his fingers through his tangled hair and glancing from one part to another of the room.

"—I've got to get out o' here, an' sudden. Can't stand it here. I don't care where I go, only I've got to get away from here. There 's nothin' I want to take. Just a blanket. No tools. I'm done mining."

Burton poked his foot at two large buckskin pouches that he had thrown contemptuously on the ground.

"You can buy a horse or mule. I mean to leave this afternoon. We can go together," Hales told him.

"I wouldn't buy nothin' in this camp. I'll walk."

"There's a good deal of dust to be packing along a trail."

"I don't care. What's the good of it, any of it? Gamblers, gamblers' women an' storekeepers—biggest robbers of all!—they get most of what us miners dig. I've worked hard all my life, been a sailor, been in lumber camps, now minin'. Any time I got money I got drunk—till little pard come along. All us miners are the same. We work hard, then robbers get it. Them de Solas are gentlemen," said Burton bitterly, " 'longside of saloonkeepers an' gamblers. Miners haven't a lick of sense. What's it all worth? What can I do? I don't know nothing but drinkin', gamblin' an' work. I can't set down an' do nothing. I don't have any sense when I start in spendin' money—but I'll be —— if gambler or woman gets Marty's share out o' me. I'll throw it back in the river first. Ain't I ever goin' to forget him, Mr. Hales?"

"No. Never."

"Then let 's get to —— out o' here an' hurry."

"Yes. But I want to stop in camp and have a word with that gambler, Dawes."

"Marty was wrong, I guess, in bein' afraid of him, in feelin' funny about him. I guess he was one man in camp that didn't have nothin' to do with it. You didn't see nothin' of him? No. Neither did I. I'd have killed him particular if I had. I know I would!"

Then Burton laid his curse upon Diamond Gulch, upon all the men in it, upon all who would ever come into it; and, as if the great Keeper of Vengeance heard, Diamond Gulch soon lost the yellow glint from among its sands, became played out; miners departed; its buildings became empty and rotted, and desolation as if from a plague settled upon what had been a famous and roaring camp.

The sun went behind the hills in the middle of the afternoon at Diamond Gulch, and a long gloomy twilight lay over the rugged land until night came.

Toward the end of the afternoon Hales went into the Ohio House where Mullins, with head tied up sat amid the wreckage while a few miners stood about and said it served him right, and worse would have been better.

"Where 'll I find that gambler?"

Mullins, with no interest, told him.

Hales went up the stairs, knocked on the door.

"Who 's there?" asked a low quiet voice.

"Dick Hales. Open this door."

As he spoke Hales tried the door, but something was against it.

"Ah, just a moment, sir—"

There was a pause, silence, then the light step of some one approaching the door. As Hales felt the prop removed, he pushed the door wide and faced the gambler, whose coat was off. Neither knife nor gun was in sight. The gambler stood tall, pale, expressionless, and steadily met Hales' dangerous look.

"What is it, sir?" asked Stewart Dawes, quietly.

He held his left hand, more heavily bandaged than usual, half across his body. With his right hand he brushed at his forehead, holding his long white fingers against his brow as if to ease slightly a headache.

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"Why did you leave San Francisco in such a hurry—after Tesla was killed?"

"I was not in San Francisco, sir, when Mr. Tesla was killed." He spoke calmly, with no trace of fear, no anger.

"No?"

"No. I had the day before engaged passage on a small schooner. I went on board that evening, early, and retired. I am subject to nervous headaches. I was suffering from one that evening. I knew nothing, sir, of Mr. Tesla's death until I heard of it in Sacramento."

The gambler was quiet, convincing; he appeared now to have a headache.

"You left without settling at your hotel," said Hales.

"I did not, sir. I inquired for the proprietor and he was out. I was ill. I then paid the clerk. If he says I did not pay, it merely means, sir, that he took advantage of my departure to keep the money."

"Why did you leave the city—in such a hurry?"

"Sir, I could not remain after the humiliation to which you had subjected me, most unjustly. My standing was ruined. I came into the mines and took another name."

"But this morning you told Mullins you had never heard of Dawes?"

"Yes sir. And do you think that I should have told *him* who I am, or that I should have wanted to see *you*?"

"Uhn," said Hales. Then— "You know of course, that you are thought to be the man that killed Tesla."

"I do not. I never heard that before, sir."

"Didn't Nevinson tell you? Didn't you see him last night?"

"No sir. I was ill and—"

"Headache comes in handy, doesn't it? Some things about Nevinson I don't like, but he said he was going to ask some questions of you. You knew of that, didn't you?"

With inflexible paleness and calm, the gambler said—

"No, sir."

"And you did not know that the man who killed Tesla had shot at *me*?"

"No sir." Then, quietly, with level gaze— "I, sir, have reasons that I shall never forget for hating you. But I never shot at any man, except at his face. I could not meet you face to face in San Francisco because my wrist was injured. You had trampled on it. You would have had all the advantage. If I were an assassin, sir, here today I could have shot you from my window."

"You could, eh? An' have been hanged, promptly. But now, when I knocked, didn't you mean to think I meant to shoot you?"

"No. Why would you shoot me? I have done nothing, sir, to hurt you. It is you who have injured me. I can never forgive you for striking me in the Magnolia when I asked for a loan."

"Why —— your soul, you told me you cheated and wanted a split!"

"No sir," the gambler answered with imperturbable dignity. "You misunderstood entirely, sir. I cannot recall the exact words, but I was, sir, a little embarrassed by the need of asking a loan from a comparative stranger. If you had not trampled on my wrist, sir, one of us would have been killed. But I was helpless. Some day, sir, we may meet again, face to face. I shall give you a gentleman's warning, of that I pledge my word."

"—— your word," said Hales, exasperated by the cool plausibility and calm of this man. "Dawes, I believe you are lying from start to finish. But today I've already seen one man that I thought guilty put to death —and he wasn't. I've looked for you in a lot of camps. Now I found you, you 're lying out of it. You say it 's got to come if we meet again, so why not give me a gentleman's warning now?"

"I am unarmed, sir."

He moved his crippled hand slightly into view, and slightly turned his long right hand, then pressed it again against his forehead.

"You 've got a gun, or borrow one. We 'll have the miners measure off any distance you say. All I ask is, just before the command to fire, you say whether or not you killed Tesla. Dawes, if you 'll say yes, I'll give you the first shot!"

The gambler looked at him steadily for some time, gently rubbing his fingers back and forth along his brow. His bandaged hand lay against his breast. He spoke evenly, quietly—

"I say no, now and for all time. I have a very severe headache. I can hardly stand, or see. It is unfortunate that I must be making excuses for myself, but my head is really bursting, sir. I have not been able to rest today because of the noise."

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"I don't know what to make of you, Dawes— How'd you hurt your hand?"

"A miner shot me, sir. Then I killed him."

"I don't know what to make of you. But I've seen one innocent fellow— I thought him guilty as ——, too— But Dawes, I believe you are a dirty, cold-blooded blackleg, and about the only reason you haven't taken a shot at me from a window, or when this door was opened, is because you *know* the miners would hang you!"

Dawes answered without a flicker in his tone, and his face, pale and thin as an ascetic's, remained inscrutable as ivory—

"You say that, sir, to an unarmed man— who is sick."

"Anyhow I've said it. You know whether or not you deserve it."

The two men stood for a time and looked at each other steadily, and without words. Then Hales turned on his heel and walked off.

Dawes put out his arm, his left arm, thrusting out the bandaged hand, pointing it; but he hesitated, did not call or move. Then Hales, without a backward glance, passed from sight.

Dawes stepped back into his room and closed the door. He stood for a moment, thoughtfully looking down at his bandaged hand; then with teeth and fingers he untied a string, threw off the cloth, and disclosed a derringer. He dropped the gun on the bed, and for a long time massaged his left hand. The pain and strain of holding the derringer in his crippled hand had been severe.

XVI

HALES and Burton passed from Diamond Gulch; Hales on horseback, Burton walking beside him with long stride, glowering fixedly. It was the end of the afternoon when they started, but they pushed on for a time in the darkness, then turned off the trail and made camp, building a fire for coffee and a slice of ham. They had spoken hardly a dozen words from the time they left the Gulch.

It was dark and still.

As Hales was pouring a cup of coffee he stopped, turned his head, listening; then dropping cup and coffee pail he moved out of the glow of the fire, saying quietly to Burton—

"Get back, well back. I heard something."

Burton, with no haste, moved aside and sat down beside a tree, waiting, listening with sullen indifference.

Hales spoke sharply—

"Who 's there?"

"Only me," said a thin childishly soft voice. "Only me, señor!"

"Who are you?" Hales asked in Spanish.

In Spanish, but with just a suggestion of surprize—

"Ah, *caballero* friend. A lone traveller, with the stomach big from emptiness."

"Come out of the shadows. Let us take a look at you."

They heard steps, and presently a slight man emerged with sly movement. The fellow looked inquiringly. He was a *vaquero*, dressed as a *vaquero*, but on foot.

"Why were you sneaking up?"

"Ah señor," said the fellow with amiable reproach, "to call it *sneak* when the world it is so full of thieves that a poor lost traveler must have a care at what camp-fire he stops."

"Where 's your horse?"

Hales knew that a *vaquero* would not go twenty yards on foot if he could help it.

"My horse and blankets, señor, are back there where I would have slept, but I saw your fire and I came carefully."

He was watching Hales, looking at him with a sort of mild anxiousness and intent curiosity. Hales, in turn, regarded the fellow searchingly, sure that he lied. A *vaquero* rarely travelled alone.

"You, señor," said the little man, "look like a Spaniard and talk like a Spaniard, but you are not a Spaniard. Is it that you are Señor Hales?"

"Yes."

"Ah—" the little fellow smiled quickly— "God gives luck! Señor—" he peered across the coals toward Burton and spoke English—"do not have fear—"

"Fear of what?" Burton growled.

"Of friends, señor!" Then he whistled, shrilly.

Hales put his hand to gun— "Here, what's up!"

"Señor, no! There are twenty men—and friends!"

From all sides there was the sound of feet, low-voiced calls, then the rapid trample of horses. Figures on foot began to emerge into vague sombreroed shapes. The camp-fire's glow struck off the glint of steel in their hands. Then horsemen picked their way between trees and under boughs, and a short

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thick man rode right up to the edge of the camp-fire, drew rein and stared savagely at Hales.

"You are Señor Hales?"

"Yes."

"In the world," said this man angrily, "there is but one gringo that could meet me tonight and live. To you, señor, is that honor! —— all Americanos!"

Low voices sharply muttered in satisfaction.

He stared at the towering form of Burton who had stood up as men gathered near.

"This man, Señor Hales, he is your friend?"

"Yes."

"Then," cried the fellow angrily to the sombreroed shadows about him, "touch nothing! Set the outposts and be ready with warning. I'll roast alive the man that fails!"

A hurried murmuring started up; the men were choosing from among themselves who was to stand guard. Then the guards vanished.

The thick-set man swung wearily from his horse, a beautiful animal, looked angrily at Hales, peered under scowling brows at Burton, tossed the reins at a man near-by and said:

"I, señor, am Don Gil Diego, for twenty years raiser and trainer of horses on the de Sola *rancho*. I hate all gringos!"

The savage Don Gil glared challengingly. Voices behind him were talking. He turned and cursed, and the voices were hushed.

Don Gil looked at the pan of coffee and politely said—

"Señor, with your permission?"

"Help yourself, señor."

"Many thanks, señor."

Don Gil poured a cup of black coffee and glanced searchingly all about the edge of the camp-fire.

"No, there is no sugar," said Hales.

"Many thanks, señor." Don Gil stopped looking for it, and sipped the black coffee. Then, petulantly, "You do not ask *why*, señor, when if you were another man I would have you killed?"

"I have done you no harm that I know of," said Hales.

"Ha! As if that would make one —— to *me!* Don José is brave, but a fool, yet I love him. They have made of Don Esteban's head a pickle that is on show in a tent at Sacramento, and Don José he says yet—'No, Don Gil, we must not kill all Americanos for that!' Bah! Bah-h-h-h!" he bellowed, and flung cup and coffee ragefully at the ground. "I will kill them! By the five wounds of Jesus, as long as there is a hand to hold knife, I will rob them and kill them!" He glared furiously. Then— "Ha, pardon, señor—" gesturing at the cup—"but I have much anger." He spoke to a man near-by— "Pour me more coffee. Move quickly. I will cut me a stick and call it your name. It will serve as well!"

DON GIL took a second cup of coffee and sipped it, but without pleasure. He wanted the sugar more than the coffee.

"If Don José had not gone—where, señor, where do you think Don José rode when we waited for the coming of that Neveenson? To the *rancho* of Señor Arnaz! And that Neveenson slipped between our fingers, so!" He held out his hand with fingers spread claw-like. "That fault it is yours, señor! Word came from Señor Arnaz to where he knew Don José could be found. Don José prayed God's blessings upon your head—and, see, señor! You are blessed, for Don Gil Diego—" he struck his own breast—"does not treat you like a gringo! Bah, I hate gringos!"

Don Gil glared his challenge first at Hales, then at Burton who understood nothing of what he was saying and did not care; then, impulsively:

"Pardon, señors! I have much anger. Don José he and his men rode toward the *rancho*, for love it calls a man from what he should do. And the trail I watched—that Neveenson he went the other. But we will get him, señor. Ha! A woman that knows all he does and where he goes, she tells. And gets gold. Bah, I hate women!"

Don Gil paused, half cocking his head, listening warily.

Don Gil seldom stayed long in one place; he had been born to the saddle, and only men who could stay in the saddle night and day rode with him. Time and again he rode boldly through mining camps, and disappeared, knowing very well that only a delayed and blundering pursuit would follow. He grew more and more brutal, became a killer, just that and nothing else; and was at last killed by one of his own men who shot him in the back. He died thanking God that he had not been slain by an American.

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"You too hate the man Neveenson, señor?"

"I certainly wouldn't call him a friend," said Hales.

"Ah, if he would but ride my horse—it was *my* horse, Don Gil's horse that he stole! If he would ride him then try to run as I rode for him, ah señor you would see a beautiful sight! One whistle and he would come to me, for so are my horses trained, always. Women I hate. Gringos I hate. Horses, señor, I love!

"You, señor, are the one to blame because that Neveenson slipped through my fingers. I would have put the brand on him as on a bullock—then hanged him for all men to see! Don José he says brand and turn him loose, but I, señor, kill! Is it not so?"

The men standing about murmured quickly, with eager praise. They feared and were devoted to Don Gil.

He now inquired of Hales as to the trails ahead. Nevinson had got through toward Sacramento; there was no use following.

As he put down the coffee cup he said:

"Señor, it is well that you keep sugar in your saddle bags, then when we meet again I will like you better. And señor, my friend, do you think that Americanos will leave California when they have the gold? It will be again a land for cattle and gentlemen?"

"No, Don Gil, they are going to find the land worth more than the gold."

"Don Gil cursed stormily; then:

"And once I did not hate Americanos! They married our daughters and were good men. They had stores in Monterey and were honest. Their ships bought our hides and the word of an Americano was good. From where, señor, come so many —— like that Neveenson?"

"Gold called them, señor."

"Bah! I will take their gold and throw it away. To spend it would mean that I must get drunk and have women. Bah! You, señor, you have gold?"

"Some," said Hales. "I travel and use a little gold."

"And he, the big man, has he gold?" Don Gil looked hard at Burton. "He does not look merry. His luck, señor, it has not been good?"

"No, Don Gil, it has not been good."

"He is your friend, Señor Hales?"

"My friend, Señor Diego."

"Then you shall learn that Don Gil Diego does not rob all Americanos! No! Gold like women makes a weight to carry. So!"

He stepped to his horse, jerked a pouch of gold from each saddle bag, and walking near held out one to Hales, one toward Burton.

Hales said to the big miner—

"He is offering you gold."

"What the —— do I want with gold?" Burton growled.

"He says, no thank you, Señor Diego."

"You will not take a gift from Don Gil Diego! Bah! You are fools! Don Gil pays for two cups of unsweetened coffee!" With that he threw the pouches upon the ground angrily, then shouted at his men—"To your horses! We ride! Señor, when I see Don José I will hold my hands to his face and say: 'See, they are clean! I found two Americanos by a camp-fire, and they lived when I had gone!' 'Who, Don Gil, were they?' 'Ho, Señor Hales who made us lose that Neveenson!' Señors, I go. *Adios!*"

He made a jump, and as if tossed upward by a spring, landed in the saddle. With a flourish he swept off his sombrero, laughing with a sort of half angered mockery, then went crashing recklessly through the trees toward the trail. In the darkness, and with such bounds, it seemed miraculous that he was not knocked off by a limb; but he, and the men with him, had the instinct of born horsemen which seems to guard a man from harm while in a saddle.

For a time Hales could hear the thump and clatter of horses' feet, then the sound grew dim and only the stillness of the wilderness was upon his ears.

XVII

THE reports brought by emigrants caused the Army to dispatch relief trains earlier than had been intended. Pack mules, loaded with flour, pork, rice and barley, driving beef cattle and work oxen, were sent in all directions from which emigrants came, and large depots were established. From these depots the scouts pushed out with laden pack mules to meet and assist emigrants. There were not enough soldiers for the work. Miners threw aside their tools and joined the pack trains.

Hales and Burton went with the train that left Sacramento on Oct. 10th under

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command of Captain Hunt to assist in the relief of emigrants who came through what was known as the Carson River Route.

Captain Hunt's party left the city in the rain. The pack train struggled along through slush and mud. All the men were kept busy covering and retying the wet packs. Burton, with a kind of sullen tirelessness, the reins of his mule on his arm, walked up and down the train, trying packs, pausing to retie them, slapping on the stragglers.

"What men these Californians are!" said Captain Hunt, observing him.

Thus it was that men who two or three years before had hardly known there was such a country as California were being called Californians, as if they were a new, recently found race; and they were, in a way, being of a race that had found new and unsuspected strength, generosity, courage within themselves after entering a far country. Until '49, it was the Spaniards who were called Californians.

The stories they soon began to hear from the emigrants that were coming through deeply affected the men, particularly Burton.

Cholera, which earlier in the year had wiped out over five thousand emigrants on the plains, had again appeared. Indians, growing bolder and bolder, were stealing stock and leaving families with teamless wagons, stranded in the midst of prairie wilderness. Oxen became worn and weary; household goods were thrown away to lighten the load; the roads were strewn with clothing, trunks, even guns. Wagons themselves were abandoned. The air was filled with stench of carcasses.

One James Abbey, an emigrant who got through, reported:

"I counted in a distance of fifteen miles 350 dead horses, 280 oxen, and 120 mules, and hundreds of others are left behind, unable to keep up. Vast amounts of valuable property have been abandoned and thrown away. In the last ten miles of this desert I counted 362 wagons, which in the States cost $120 each."

From the Army's relief depots the scouts, usually in pairs, with mules and what provisions could be carried, pushed out in search of the most destitute.

Hales and Burton rode together. Rain, snow, sleet fell. They at times met emigrants, many on foot, some without food, yet carrying mining tools.

"Throw them —— things away," Burton would say. "Get farms—stay away from the mines!"

He had adopted as the gospel what Hales had told him as a prophecy, that emigrants were going to find more wealth in farms than mines.

Burton and Hales pushed clear to the desert of the Humboldt Sink. They could have walked that desolate area by stepping from one dead mule or oxen to another.

There were whole families on foot, with hardly clothing on their backs and no food; men were living on the flesh of long-dead mules; children were without water. Provisions were doled out by the scouts, government mules and oxen put to the wagons, and the emigrants sent on. When they reached mining camps, miners gave them money, merchants gave them food.

The emigration along the Humboldt River stopped abruptly. Those who were coming had either died or reached the foot of the mountains and were helped across. Those who had decided to wait for Spring, when there would be plenty of feed, had gone into encampment near Salt Lake.

About the last of the emigrants heard of along the Carson route before the Army, withdrew—and it did not withdraw as long as there was possibility of other emigrants coming—were, so the report said, two or three wagons that had ventured into what the emigrants thought was a mountain cut-off called Indian Ledge.

"We'll go see," said Burton to the officer who had received the report.

IT WAS a thirty-mile ride along a mountain trail, hardly a trail. Rain was coming down; at times it turned into a mushy snow, at other times a moist sleet. He and Hales started in early afternoon with two pack mules, and climbed along the trail as long as there was light. They camped in wet clothes under cut boughs, over which wet blankets were spread. The rain, warmed by some air current, tried in vain to turn itself into snow. Snow would have been more comfortable.

The next morning before daylight they were up and on their way. The rain became a miserable drizzle of sleet. The trail was a broken thread of ledge winding down a mountain. No wagon could possibly, or anything like possibly, have come through.

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About noon they came upon a straggling party of four men, wretched fellows, limping along. They shouted deliriously at the sight of Hales and Burton. Miles and miles back—they had lost all account of distance—their oxen had given out, even long before the road became impassable for a wagon.

They cried out ravenously for food, snatched what was given them, ate hysterically, chattering, cursing, praying, demanding to know how much farther. They expected to have the pack mules to ride.

"Who's behind you?" asked Hales.

"Fellow named Taylor—'bout ten mile. His oxen went down after he struck the worst of the road. Woman an' two children—"

Burton, in the very gesture of doling out food, threw the food on the ground and cursed them. They shrank from him. He was dangerous. They tried to explain. What could they do? How help? There was no food. The oxen had been only skin and bones, and there was no food for anybody. They now, said these wretched men, could hardly walk. How help other people? And why merely stay by them to die and watch them die?

Burton would not listen to explanations. He cursed them with deep-throated sullenness, jammed food into his saddle bags, mounted his mule.

"I'm going ahead," he told Hales. "Sometimes its minutes that count."

He rode off.

The half-starved men begged for more food than Hales rationed them.

"It would be merely extra weight to carry. Soon as you got tired you'd fling it away. That's enough to see you through."

They begged for the pack mules, for at least one.

"No," Hales told them. "Not while there are women and children to carry out."

Driving the mules before him, Hales went on. The sleety rain continued.

A rock turned under a mule's foot; the mule slipped, came down on its knees, and arose. Hales dismounted, examined the injury, took off the pack, put it to one side of the trail, then shot the mule.

Late in the afternoon he met Burton, coming back through the sleety rain, bowed, marching up the trail. He was on foot; one child was on his arm, the other was strapped to his back. He led his mule. A woman, huddled forward as if more than half dead, was strapped into the saddle, with canvas wrapped about her.

"Here, you take this pack mule," said Hales.

"No, the man's down. Can't walk. I told him you 'd be along. He's a *man*. Said take out his wife an' chilern—never mind about him. By ——, I'll get them out an' afore morning!"

Hales swung from his saddle.

"Here, take my horse."

"No. Make better time afoot. I know the trail. I'm goin' straight through an' get these people under cover."

He would not parley. He went on. Broad, powerful, grim and generous, pouring out his strength for a woman and children whom he did not know, and whom he would probably never see again after that thirty-miles climb over a mountain trail, through the rain, in the night.

Hales turned and looked after him amid the penciling of rain. Great in strength, great-hearted. "Californian," Captain Hunt had called him. One of the new race. Californians. Other forms and figures of this new breed drifted across Hales' thoughts—Judge Deering, thundering at an angered mob. Wallace B. Kern, more proud of having been a miner than of having been a Senator in New York. Clay Freeman, ex-butcher, rude and crude, but clean-hearted, honest. Dr. Perle. Yank and the surly Joe. Maw Jones, Gubbins, and Maria the indomitable. Ezekiel Preble, street preacher and prophet. Nameless scores of miners, soldiers, merchants. Californians. No longer did the name mean a dark-eyed, pastorial people.

A mile or two farther on he came to a wagon. How it had got that far up the mountains was difficult to imagine. But it was empty except for a gaunt, bearded weak man, who lay with motionless peering.

"Will they get through!" he shouted at Hales, weakly.

"Yes. Give that fellow a child to carry—he'll go through hell.

"Don't curse," said the man Taylor. "It doesn't sound right to curse now."

"I wasn't cursing," said Hales. "I was just telling you about that man."

Hales took an ax from the pack, cut into the wagon to get dry wood, made a small fire under the wagon, made tea, fried bacon,

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fed the man Taylor, who was, in spite of his unkempt appearance, plainly a man of some refinement.

"If they get through I don't care what happens to me," he muttered broodingly.

"I guess you're one of the new breed all right," said Hales, looking at him.

The man stared questioningly, but Hales did not explain. He was looking hard, then, doubtfully:

"Your name's Taylor—Samuel Taylor?"

"Who—*who* are you?"

"Dick Hales."

"You—Dick Hales! Oh, Oh!"

Taylor grasped him, hung to him, staring at him.

The last time they had met was years before when Hales, on a visit to the East, had stood near his brother in an old New England church while a beautiful girl, innocent, shy, had received upon her finger a ring and promised to love the man by her side until death did them part; and this was the elder brother of that girl.

XVIII

BY THE end of November all the emigrants of the Carson River Route had been pushed through. Most of them reached Sacramento, many camped under the oaks near the town, expecting to winter under such scraps of canvas as they could find.

At Sacramento Hales and Burton bought a wagon and mules, put the Taylors into it and set out toward El Crucifijo. There were plenty of buildings on the ranch, it was conveniently near San Francisco, and, moreover, Hale's ranch.

Burton, in the companionship of the Taylor children, found some relief for the pain that lay in his memory. The poor little starvelings seemed to draw some of his great strength unto themselves and he usually had one or the other of them on his shoulders.

Mrs. Taylor could hardly stir from the mattress on the wagon bed. She was a very religious woman; but, as she smilingly told Hales, her idea of what angels were like had been changed. Now she knew that they were great, bearded, shaggy men, with deep voices, who sometimes swore at mules.

On the road it rained frequently but, after a rain, with the canvas pushed up, she would lie and look for hours at the rolling hills, dotted with oaks, warmed by the sun. The song of meadow larks was in the air.

Many camp-fires lay behind them then one afternoon they turned from the road that went to San Francisco and made camp by the oaks near the road that led to the rancho. Before dark they could easily have reached El Crucifijo, but it was pleasant weather and Hales thought it better to camp here while he went to the ranch and explained the situation to Miss Tesla.

Hales unsaddled, unharnessed and picketed the mules and his horse. Burton built a fire, swung the kettle above it on a pole across forked sticks, and got out the bacon for an early supper.

Hales heard horses coming. He stood up and peered toward the road. They were five men; they had left the main road and were coming toward El Crucifijo. One of them was a Spaniard. Nearly all Americans in California at that time looked like border ruffians, being bearded, roughly dressed, armed. These men were rough of mouth too. They turned from the road and came up to the wagon. There was a searching, appraising look in their eyes.

Burton stood up and glowered at the leader, who asked—

"Why are you fellers campin' here?"

"Why shouldn't we camp here?" said Hales, stepping from beside the wagon.

The leader looked at him carefully. The other horsemen stared about; and there was that in their eyes which made Hales feel they were looking to see if anything was in sight that they though worth stealing.

"Well, you're off the road to 'Frisco," said the leader.

"Yes," said Burton, "an' we'll likely stay off it long as we want too."

"You fellers don't 'pear to be very —— sociable!"

"Not very," Burton agreed sullenly.

The Spaniard was on a de Sola horse, and Hales eyed the man.

"Come on Ed," one of the gang called to the leader. "We want 'o hurry an' git thar."

"Yeah," said another, "we gotta hang that feller afore sundown."

"Who," asked Burton, with an echo of pain in his voice, "you goin' to hang!"

Ed, the leader, grinned.

"A —— thief what we know where to catch. We'll make a crucer*fix* outta that feller." He was evidently a little hazy

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on the significance of a crucifix. Then—"You fellers from the mines, ain't you?"

"Emigrant wagon," said Hales, scenting thievery in the question.

"But he's a miner—" pointing at Burton.

"Any luck, pard?" a voice inquired at once.

"What," said Hales in Spanish, "are you rascals about?"

The Spaniard gave a start. He appeared a glum villainous fellow, but answered readily—

"The Americanos look for a thief, señor. They ride to El Crucifijo."

"Here what you sayin'?" demanded Ed. "Talk plain English, by ——!"

"Why do you go to El Crucifijo?" asked Hales.

"None o' yore —— bus'ness," said Ed. "We gotta be gittin' along. Come on boys!"

He gave a yell, reined back his horse, wheeled about and rode off furiously; the others with him, and now and then they sent up a wild yell.

"There," said Hales, "is a mess of scoundrels. They are up to something. I'll saddle up and go now to the ranch."

"I'm comin' too," said Burton. He turned toward Taylor. "There won't be no anger, only take that loaded rifle an' use it if any o' them fellows come back here." Burton then looked through the end of the wagon: "You won't be afraid, Ma'am?"

"No," said Mrs. Taylor, "I shall never in my life be afraid again."

She had passed through cholera on the plains, thirst in the desert, starvation in the mountains; in her weakened body nothing was left but courage and faith.

XIX

AT EL CRUCIFIJO the shaggy-headed Ferdinand listened with patience and in mild stubbornness offered gentle answers to Kredra's urging that he be up and about the duty of his long-sworn oath.

When Martin O'Day's letter had, after an entanglement of delays, reached Ilona she read it with a mingling of half sobs and laughter, told what was in it to Kredra, and Kredra had at once taken Ferdinand aside.

"Go! He is there, that Dawez—there from where the letter came. Go!"

From that day Ferdinand had no peace, though he might ask:

"But who will stay and watch over the one we love? And you? Who will stay to guard if bad luck it should try to come to El Crucifijo? That turnip, Pedro?"

"God, who has sent word will watch. Go! Go quickly! God does not twice aid one who sleeps when the Oath is sworn!"

Ferdinand was still a good Basque, but his oath, impetuously sworn, did not mean so much now as before he had wandered for twenty years and more among men who had scant faith in any oath.

"Wisest of Women," he protested, "some one must remain here."

"Go!" Kredra insisted angrily. "He has the luck of evil men, and will escape you!"

"The knife will find him. Ho, be patient, Kredra, Wise-Woman, and listen now, I will play you a *habanera*—"

"Twanger of strings and tongue! Idler! Fool! You throw away what God has sent. Punishment will fall upon you! Go! In the midst of a thousand camps you are told where to find him, and you doze with song on your mouth! Up! Go!"

"God who knows all things will not be angry," said Ferdinand complacently.

So, almost every day Kredra spoke and Ferdinand answered.

This day, as they talked in the afternoon shadows of a crumbling building, Ferdinand sat upon a bench with legs crossed, guitar in his lap and strummed absently.

"Who idles when the Oath is sworn, dies!" said Kredra, who had kept the faith of her Fathers.

"True, true, Woman of Wisdom. I do not idle. I stand guard!"

"E-ah, Fool! Fool to think to turn aside the Wrath with idle words! Evil gnaw you!"

"Evil, evil, evil—always the word is on your tongue. You do not laugh. You do not sing. I play, you frown, Woman of Shadows, but—now who comes?"

Ferdinand tossed the guitar across his back and with a full-chested swagger went round the corner into view of the horsemen he had heard coming on the road.

At a glance he saw they were strangers, excepting one Gomez, a thief, with whom he had had some slight companionship in an affair or two of gold-hunting. The others were Americans, and did not have the faces of men he would willingly invite to a table.

"Ho-o-a-ho!" he shouted heartily, but with doubtful rapid glances from one to another, "what saints bring you?"

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"That him?" a horseman called at Gomez.

"*Si!*" said Gomez.

With a rush the Americans spurred at Ferdinand. He stepped back quickly. Revolvers were drawn, pointed at his head. The horsemen encircled him.

"The devil eat you uncooked!" said Ferdinand in Spanish to Gomez. Then with a look of bewildered innocence gazed from one to another of those who aimed at his head, and spoke softly—"Señors, what wrong is it I have done you? Point to the ground! It has no head, the ground, an' your fingers shake. Ho-Oh, you think Ferdinand is some other man!" He laughed.

"We'll make you laugh from t'other side o' that big mouth o' yourn!" said one; and another asked of Gomez again— "This is him?"

"*Si*, Señor. Eet is Ferdinand!"

"Twice you have lied!" Ferdinand answered, and a gleam of fury crossed his black eyes.

"Ah," Gomez told him with a sort of sour triumph, "the Donna Elvira has sent us!"

"Then good God help me!" he answered humbly, but at once with a brush of his hand he pushed his hat from his head.

He tossed his head, shaking the tangled curly hair, looking upwards at the faces of the men on horseback as his thoughts scattered in all directions, looking for some trick to fool these men. But he was hemmed in on all sides.

Kredra, like the leader of a tragic chorus, from afar shouted at him—

"Faithless to your Oath, it has come!"

She stood apart, looking upon these men darkly.

Ferdinand swung his guitar before him.

"It is a joke," he said, laughing, "but you are not any leetle less welcome. Ho an' now I sing!"

The men were surprized, interested, doubtful, for Ferdinand strummed, and as he danced his fingers over the strings he improvised a chant, giving his warning to Kredra—

"Take the One we love and flee,
Let them not see,
Let her not be seen—Go!
The good Donna's evil hand
Strikes at Ferdinand—
Go!
Let her not be seen
Lest these devils mean
Harm to her! God's wrath
May hate me for the oath he hath
Heard me forswear by idleness—Go!
Pray, pray me from this Donna's trap
And what may come or what may hap
I swear anew the Oath to keep
Without rest and without sleep—
Go!"

"Here, stop that!" shouted Ed. Brent, the leader. "This ain't no time for singin'."

"Ho, I give you the song of welcome though you are stranger-men. What it is that Ferdinand can do you would like, eh?"

"We 're goin' t' hang you in 'bout two shakes of a sheep's tail. But first you tell us whar that gold is you stole!"

"Me, steal!"

"You, yeah. This *is* the feller ain't it?"

"*Si señor!*"

"Thrice you have lied!" said Ferdinand in Spanish.

"Cough up that gold. Whar 's it hid?"

"What gol', señors?"

"That gold you stole from miners. We know all about you, you ——!" curses followed.

"Ah, señors—" reproachfully—"you beleeve liar-men!"

"Huh-huh," said Ed Brent, with a kind of amused snort, "it was a woman that put us on to you!"

"An' does nevare a woman lie, señor? Ho, Ferdinand is no thief. He is an hones' man an' sing songs!"

"String him up!" said one of the horsemen.

"Dig up that gold, you!"

"But señors, I have no gol'. Hones'!"

"Put a rope on him. Then he 'll talk I bet you!"

"We 'll let you off if you dig up the gold," said Ed Brent.

"Ah, that I had gol'! But Ferdinand is poor, being an hones' man!"

"Say, who's that woman?" one of them asked, pointing to where Kredra had stood. Now she had disappeared.

"Oh," said Ferdinand carelessly, "jus' a woman an' works."

"Who is she?" Gomez was asked.

"I do not know, señors."

"How many folks are there around her?" Brent demanded of Ferdinand.

"Not manee—ten or twelve, señors."

"Say, Ed," said a fellow a little uneasily, "maybe we'd better take a look around?"

"Look, ——! He's a greaser, ain't he? Thief, ain't he? We got the right to hang greaser-thiefs, ain't we?" To Ferdinand: "See that there tree?" Brent pointed to the

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rough oak that gave the *rancho* its name. "If you don't dig up that gold, an' be in a —— of a hurry about it, you swing, an' —— high!"

Ferdinand knew that the longer he kept these men expecting to get gold from him the longer he would live; and that the good Donna, who never forgave a man, had put these men upon him because of his faithlessness to her, because he had turned bodyguard to a girl that she regarded as a rival.

"You an' Gomez here, an' others," said Brent, "you stole from Americans. We goin' to have it!"

"He says that?" Ferdinand pointed at Gomez. "Ah-ho! He has fool you with lies. Because he is a thief, am I?"

"There 's somebody else as says it too, an' he"—Brent pointed also to Gomez—"he's a friend of hern?"

"Friend? How know you her?" Ferdinand rattled in Spanish. "Where did you meet? How? Why? You rode with Don Gil Diego who is my friend! For this he will put you alive on coals!"

Gomez shrugged his shoulders and set about rolling a cigaret as he replied—

"If the dead can speak you may tell Don Gil."

"Say, Ed, stretch his neck a bit an' stop that greaser-talk. Make him talk good plain American."

"All right," said Brent. "Tie him up. We're goin' 'o hang you, greaser, if you don't dig up that gold!"

"Hang heem firs', señors—" he pointed at Gomez—"then I will give you gol'!"

Gomez tossed aside his cigaret and said quietly:

"You hear, señors. He has the gold. Make heem give it up."

"All right, we'll just stretch that neck o' yourn a little, Ferdy!"

Two men dismounted. Another rode closer and held a gun within a foot of Ferdinand's head while the two men tied his hands and slipped a noose over his head.

"How much gol', señors, would it take to make you b'leeve me an' hones' man?"

"Ho," said Brent, "*now* you 're talkin'. All you 've got!"

Ferdinand's guitar dangled from his shoulder by the strap on which it was slung. His hands were tied.

"Señors, I have been to the mines. I sang an' played an' men they dance—" He shuffled his feet to illustrate, and with the motion of his body jerked and wrenched at the rope on his wrist. His head bubbled with tricky thought. If he could get his hands free, toss off the noose, jump to the saddle of one of the men that had dismounted— Being near death did not discourage him. And Kredra, woman of dark wisdom, had warned him that punishment would come if he forgot his oath. But even now he had too much faith in himself to be really afraid. "Señors, I have a leetle gol'. By makin' men merry I got it. If it will buy my neck from this slim maiden rope, it is yours."

"Tell us whar?"

"It is not much, señors. Hones' men are poor. But—"

"Well I'll be ——," said one of the men. "If he ain't got his hand loose! Jake, you done a fine job o' tyin'—"

"The blankety blank!"

They tied his wrists again, winding them tightly; and the chance of again working them loose undetected was gone, for one of the men stood behind him and kept an eye upon the knots.

Ferdinand pitched his voice to a deep-throated eerie anger and said—

"Dead men live a long long time, señors. I will ride on the air an' finger your throats, A-ho! an' seeng words you think it is the wind that whispers to make the blood freeze. Oh oh oh think well before you hang Ferdinand, an' make of him a ghost!"

He had known such words to make uneasy men of other races, and Gomez now had an uneasy stare, but the hard-headed scoundrelism of Brent and his men hardly understood of what Ferdinand talked.

"Talk don't worry us none," said Ed Brent. "Stretch his neck a little—'less he 's ready to talk sense."

"With a knot at my throat I speak not easily, señors!"

"Draw it tighter, Cliff!"

Cliff jerked. Ferdinand staggered, caught himself, coughed, shook his head, glared. Ferdinand knew very well that these men did not mean really to hang him as long as they hoped to get him to give them gold, though now Ed Brent said—

"Pitch the rope over that there tree an' give 'er a yank, Cliff."

Ferdinand, with hands bound and led by a man on horseback, moved toward the tree; two men followed afoot, leading their horses.

When they came under the tree, crudely

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like a cross, the man Cliff rose in his stirrups, tossed the end of the rope over a limb, then caught it and took a turn around the saddle horn.

"That's it!" said Brent. "Now lift him off the ground a wee mite!"

"Señors!" cried Ferdinand.

But they wanted to show him that they meant business. Cliff rode forward a few steps. The rope tauted. Ferdinand was jerked forward, came to his toes, lost his balance, fell, dangled for a moment. Then Cliff reined back.

"Now we'll see if he 'll talk," said Brent.

Ferdinand did not talk. His feet touched the ground, but his legs were limber. His knees slacked. As the rope was eased, he sank as if lifeless, nearer and nearer the ground, and lay motionless.

"——," said Cliff, "his neck must a broke like a pipe stem!"

"Cliff, you must a jerked!"

"I never! I eased him up slow."

"Loosen up that noose," said Brent.

The noose was slackened. Ferdinand, in spite of wish and will, coughed.

"Possumin'!" cried Brent, half admiringly. "Now you talk!"

No answer. Ferdinand coughed and gasped; having failed to play dead, he was, as the next best thing, playing half dead.

"String 'im up again," said Brent. "He 's just possumin'!"

NEAR them a voice spoke, sharp, clear, indignant; a woman's—

"Take that rope from Ferdinand! Leave this *rancho*! Oh you beasts of men!"

She was a young woman, strangely unlike any of the women they knew. She was tall, straight, her head was bare, her eyes were steady, and in her eyes was an almost golden gleam. She looked at them angrily and unafraid, and had come unnoticed to within a few yards, then spoke.

Near her side, slightly behind her, was the dark woman, sullen of feature, sibylline, standing as if about to pronounce a malediction.

"Well, I'll be ——!" said Brent, reining about, staring. "Whar did you come from!"

"This is my land, my *rancho*, my home! You men leave it, and now!"

Ferdinand got to his knees, and from knees to feet. As he arose he shouted hoarsely at Ilona—

"Back! Away! These men are robbermen! You, Kredra the Faithless—"

"As well hold the wind with words!" Kredra answered. She had done all that she could do to check Ilona, and Ilona had come.

"If you men *are* thieves," said Ilona scornfully, "take what there is—go through the house. Be quick—that you may the sooner leave!"

"Lady," Ed Brent answered, grinning, gallantly, not with menace, "if we took what we wanted, it 'd be *you!*"

Hearing that, Ferdinand cursed and struggled, swore hoarsely, mingling all the oaths that nearly thirty years of world-wandering had brought to his tongue. He writhed, jerking powerfully. The guitar dangled and thumped like a dead thing about his neck. But bound at the wrists, with a noose on his neck, he was helpless. His breath made a sharp sound between his teeth. Foam and blood appeared on his mouth.

"Stretch him up a little, Cliff. Stop that racket while I talk some more to this here lady!"

Ilona started forward.

"No you don't!" said Ed Brent, spurring his horse before her.

Cliff rode forward, with his head turned back watchfully. Ferdinand's oaths were strangled.

"Whoa, back up a mite," said Cliff to his horse, and he reined back until Ferdinand's feet were barely on the ground, his neck awry, twisted by the pull of the rope. He could hardly breathe.

Brent's horse was before Ilona. She could not see Ferdinand. She looked up at Brent.

"My yore purtty!" he said. He said it honestly. There was no honesty, and but little, if any decency in Brent, but at that moment he had no thought of violence toward Ilona. She was strange, unlike any woman he had ever seen.

"I have jewels. Go into my house. Take them. Leave!"

"Whar 'd you come from anyhow?"

Her head came up with a gathering of angry scorn. This man might rob her, but she would not hold conversation with him.

"Take what you will, and go!"

"We 're goin' hang this here feller," said Ed Brent, grinning a little. "That is, 'less you *specially* want him saved. I'd do most any ol' thing for you!"

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It was Kredra that answered, and Brent glanced toward her. He did not understand her words, but the tone, the look, the fluency of harsh sounds had something eerie in them that reached to even his coarse consciousness. Ilona, who did understand, shuddered, but she did not reproach Kredra for her terrible curse laid upon this man.

"Hey, Ed! Here comes them two fellers!" Cliff shouted.

Brent glanced over his shoulder, pulled his horse. Everyone looked toward where Cliff had pointed. Two mounted men were coming at a gallop.

Brent swore, pushed his horse into the road, pulled his hat down, and waited, frowning. Cliff, with rope to saddle horn was just behind him. The others of the gang stared, motionless.

Ilona had turned, peering hopefully. Then in the midst of silence, Kredra spoke sharply—

"E-ah! It is the man!"

Hales rode in the lead. Twenty feet before Brent he drew rein, and stopped abruptly. Already he had seen Ilona, Kredra, Ferdinand so nearly off the ground as to appear dangling.

"What's up here!" said Hales, not asking a question, but giving a challenge.

"We hang a thief!" said Brent.

"He lies! They are robber-men!" cried Kredra.

"Is this true?" Hales did not look toward her, but Ilona knew that he spoke to her. She answered—

"It is true!"

There was no more of a warning than that; Brent's hand rested on the handle of his revolver, but it was not clear of the holster before Hales shot him.

Brent sagged backward in the saddle; his hands came up with a wavering groping; he reeled to one side, hung poised for a moment by the convulsive balancing of muscles trained to the saddle, then toppled and with sliding movement pitched head first to the ground. His horse swung about, shying, but did not leave the road.

Gomez, with whom the Dona Elvira had bargained for Ferdinand's neck, was not a man to stand and fight; he wheeled and rode off as fast as spurs and lash could speed his horse. The two men on foot ran for their horses; and one, hit by a shot from Burton, rode off reeling and cursing; the other fired as he fled, but his aim was harmless.

The fellow known as Cliff had instantly drawn his gun, struck his horse with spurs, but he forgot the rope fast to his saddle horn. As he reached to shoot behind him he struck his arm against the tautened rope. His gun went off aimlessly. Hales, as his own horse lurched forward under the drive of spurs, shot Cliff from the saddle.

Then Hales, spurring blood from the flanks of his horse, as he leaned from the saddle simply opened his out-stretched hand and dropped his gun, and groped for the reins of the riderless horse, turning him into a narrowing circle as a cow pony turns a bolting yearling. The rope was fast to the saddle horn, the noose was fast to Ferdinand's neck and, at the first plunge of the horse as Cliff sprawled from the saddle, Ferdinand was swayed into mid-air.

All that happened was over in a few pulse beats, but those who watched—Burton, with his mule reined back on its haunches, Kredra, somberly intent, Ilona, rigid, horrified—felt the emotion of a long drawn suspense as Hales snatched at flying reins and missed. His horse with plunging bounds out-circled the other, and Hales swung far from his saddle, caught at the reins, missed, reached an inch farther, fingered them, gripped them, jerked, again, again, again, turning both horses into a narrowing circle; and the body of Ferdinand came slowly down until the feet touched, then his broad heavy body sagged limply and sank unconscious to the ground.

With the rope slack, Hales cast it free from the horn of the saddle where it had been caught with a double half-hitch, and turned loose the excited horse, which went galloping wildly with stirrups flapping. The other two men of Brent's gang had flung themselves into their saddles and made off.

Burton, with a haste almost like falling, got from his mule, ran to Ferdinand, crouched, pulled loose the noose and with a gesture of anger flung it aside. The rope slid from across the limp form and fell into curves and coils like a long sinister serpent suddenly slain.

Kredra, Ilona, Hales, all crouched at the side of the body, all afraid of death, each hesitating to speak. The guitar was broken. Burton pulled it loose, threw it aside. Hales opened the shirt, put his ear to the broad breast, listened, heard nothing.

"Get whisky—water—anything!" he said.

A loud shrill wail went up. Little Pedro,

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who had come from cover now that danger was over, howled. He loved Ferdinand; and, after all, Pedro might have said truthfully that it was not his fault if the good God had not made him brave enough to fight odds when the man he loved was in peril. But he said nothing of the sort. Instead he faced in the direction of the men who had fled, brandished his fists, dared them to come back—then broke into wails as he again looked down upon his friend.

"Come," said Hales to Burton, "into the house with him—it is getting dark—with a neck like that, so thick—he isn't dead!"

Ferdinand was heavy, but Burton was powerful, Hales strong. They lifted him. Kredra hurried ahead. Ilona took one of Ferdinand's dangling hands between her own, pressed it, held it as if trying to warm it back to life.

Inside the house she showed the way into her own dark room, now darkened by the coming of twilight. She held aside the hide across the doorway.

They put him on the broad low bed, and as they laid him down the unconscious body gave a gasping choking sigh.

Then Kredra entered with a bottle of whisky. Ilona turned to a candle, lighted it, held it over the bed.

"His fool's heart is wiser now," said Kredra, woman of dark wisdom, and no one knew of what she was talking.

XX

THERE were two candles on the table, the broad heavy table, around which families had crowded at times of feast; and between these candles Ilona and Hales faced each other.

Hales had no more than begun to explain who the Taylors were, and his wish that they might rest in more peace and comfort than was possible in a city, when instantly Ilona said—

"Bring them here to *my rancho* and—"

Said Hales when she had finished: "I didn't know—this is your ranch now?"

"Without saying a word of what he meant to do, Col. Nevinson deeded the ranch over to me. And Judge Deering, though I tell him the Colonel simply must accept payment, looks at me in the queerest way and says, 'Be patient, Miss Tesla. In this most complicated world there are many ravels and tangles. Be patient and I am sure all will come out well.' I haven't the slightest idea of what he means."

"Uhn," said Hales and rolled, very carefully, a new cigaret.

He told her the bitter news of Martin O'Day, and she wept, and brought him Martin's letter. He told her that Burton was Marty's Bill and of the work Burton had done in the mountains, helping emigrants.

Then Ferdinand came to the doorway, bulking large in the gloom.

"Well my freends, Ah-o," he said, not so loudly as usual, but with spirit and the twisted lip of a noiseless laugh. "My guitar it is broke. My neck it has a kink. My arms here"—he held them out—"where my hands grow to them, they are raw. But I am fine. Yes! Señor Death he is a tiger-cat an' Ferdinand a mouse-thing. You the great good Señor Hales! Kredra has tol' me—"

Behind him stood Kredra, motionless, with a tragic fateful steadiness in her black eyes.

Ferdinand came forward, not weakly, but with a kind of rheumatic carefulness. His neck was warped, but since he had life he was cheerful. He had barely escaped the squeezing of Death's fingers, but one who had lived a long life was likely to have many such escapes.

Ilona soon left them. Burton had returned to the Taylors' camp; Hales was remaining the night on the bare chance that some of Brent's gang might return. If he had gone while Ferdinand was still unconscious, the women would have been alone except for little Pedro who, unless avenging a personal insult, had no more courage than a rabbit. He was a good enough little fellow, full of dishonest instincts, but harmless. He had tried to steal Hales' revolver, picking it up from the road; but, detected, invoked a long list of saints to witness that he had picked it up, thrust it out of sight in his shirt, only to care for it, and restore it to Señor Hales.

"My throat," said Ferdinand, feeling of it with both hands, "is all pain as if I had eat splinters. An' you see how I talk with squeeky voice, as if each leetle word is a rat an' I drag him out by the tail."

His neck was twisted, and across the table from Hales where Ilona had been sitting, Ferdinand had to sit sidewise to look straight at Hales; but his eyes were straight and steady as he spoke.

"You bring—" he spoke Spanish—"your

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friends to our *rancho?* Ah, that is good, good. An' do you stay, too? You come and go maybe? Come much and go but little, señor! Tomorrow I go from here. When I come again I do not know. As many days as that—" he raised the fingers of both hands—"or as that—" He opened and closed his hands rapidly. "I do not know. And you will stay, señor? I have seen that where you are no harm can come. Today you saw! Err-ah! The robber-man he said to her, the little one, 'It is you I want!' Señor, I do not remember one thing from then till I awoke with my neck like this. Kredra has told me, all. Kredra, who knows hidden things, is your friend, señor, and Kredra the wise woman is the friend of but few men. You she likes. The Colonel Nevinson she does not hate. I am her brother. But all other men are dogs."

"I have business in the city," said Hales. "Besides Miss Tesla may not wish that I stay. And doesn't Col. Nevinson come here, frequently?"

Ferdinand looked at him thoughtfully and tried to shake his head, but his neck was too stiff. He said:

"I remember, yes. Our colonel is not your friend. No, señor, he does not come much for he is a man of no luck and it is said that he loses so much money that he grows poor. Fool of a man! More than ever now he loves the good Dona, and she never forgets. I know her, señor. The devil himself knows her not better than Ferdinand. But Ferdinand can never lift his hand against her, not though—though—" he paused. He was instinctively secretive and seldom told anything. But, with resolution, he explained:

"She took Ferdinand once from men who would have squeezed his neck. Today she gave him back to such men. It was his debt to her. The debt is paid. But whom Ferdinand has loved he never hates, though señor, he may stay far off and look out. Now Señor Hales we will talk of what you must do while I am gone—"

Ferdinand talked but, secretively, did not say where he was going, or why.

THE next morning the Taylors came to El Crucifijo. Burton drove but walked, for it cramped him to be on a wagon seat; and with the prerogative of a bearded angel he did now and then swear at the mules.

Ferdinand's neck was swollen and stiffly awry; he found words even more difficult to pull out by their tails, but he was in good spirit. Having looked carefully at Burton, at Taylor, thin, stooped, weak but with the mark of a gentleman upon him, at Mrs. Taylor who could not as yet even walk, at the children, Ferdinand was satisfied and put them into the quarters, some distance from the ranch house, that had formerly been used by the Castros whom Ferdinand had driven from El Crucifijo in the days when he did not want honest people about.

Ferdinand rode off before noon of that day, and none but Kredra knew what was this matter of great importance that, as he said, took him to the mines.

Christmas was just two days away. They would not have known if Ilona had not told them. Hales, that afternoon, rode into San Francisco to tell John Taylor and Anna that their brother was at El Crucifijo.

XXI

IT WAS after dark when Hales arrived and a misty rain was falling. He put up his horse and started directly for Judge Deering's office. Men stumbled about through the mud in the drizzle, cursing and shouting good-naturedly; many of them carried lanterns. Lights blazed from the doorways of saloons. It sounded as if every saloon had an orchestra, every gambling house a band. As he crossed the plaza he heard a strident voice crying through the gloom. It was the voice of the street preacher, Preble. Rain or fog, he appeared every night; but in spite of his wrathful warnings, saloons increased, wickedness flourished.

Judge Deering was alone, reading aloud from a book of poems. His first gesture toward Hales was one of great delight, then his manner changed and foreshadowed unpleasant news.

"Two days ago," he said heavily, "Anna Hales disappeared from Preble's house, where she made her home. We, sir, fear suicide. My boy John—" Judge Deering spoke of young John Taylor, and treated him, as a son—"is desperately anxious. We have looked everywhere and made inquiries. Not a thing, sir, can be learned."

Hales told Judge Deering of the Taylors, ending:

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"—she would, of course, do something flagrant at just this time. Both he and Mrs. Taylor want to see her. They don't of course suspect in what shape I found her—I said she was very sick. But both of them now think—when you 've crossed the plains, Judge, it seems to make you more charitable—that Anna would have been a better woman if they had been more forgiving, earlier—

"And now, Judge," Hales asked with a trace of amusement, "I 'd like to know just who does own that ranch?"

"You do, sir. You do. But when Col. Nevinson, sir, finding that Miss Tesla wished to own the ranch, simply put the deed he held in her name, and with customary irritability refused any suggestion of payment, I did not have the cruelty to say to him, 'Very generous, but an empty flourish, sir!' To say that would have been inhuman, however honest, for Col. Nevinson is almost a bankrupt. A little money would mean much. His fair-weather friends have scampered from him. He no longer has credit or resources that are negotiable. Each morning men expect him to acknowledge bankruptcy.

"Sir, it was under such circumstances that he gave what he thought was El Crucifijo to Miss Tesla and refused to tarnish his gift with money. I can not but admire him, though, sir, he has become less admirable in many ways. Drinks more; and, if possible, is more quarrelsome; insults his former associates who wisely refuse him credit and will not listen to those who do wish him well. He takes pains to insult prominent people, sir, by declaring that his only friends are such persons as Monsieur Max, the keeper of a bawdy house, and that Eton woman who should be an inmate of the house!

"I understand, sir, that the reconciliation was effected when she sent him a heavy pouch of gold dust, saying it was all she had, and at this time of his need would he take it as a token of the friendship that had once been theirs? He returned the gold in person. You can readily understand how such a flourish of generosity would move a man like Col. Nevinson, particularly at a time when those whom he thought good friends would not lend him a dollar. Why a woman of her avaricious nature and calling would with so timely a gesture call to her the devotion of a bankrupt, I cannot imagine—unless it is barely possible that she loves him!"

"Or hates him?" said Hales.

"Eh?"

"Wants to be where she can watch him suffer when the crash comes. Then remind him of a few things she hasn't forgotten."

"What a ghastly opinion you have of human nature, sir," said the Judge, unreproachfully. "The crash is not far off, though the colonel still holds his head high as any man's. You recall that he speculated heavily in lumber. He owns nearly all the lumber in San Francisco, and today it is worthless. For the time being, there is no building going on, and we are in the midst of a great depression—"

He also said:

"That Eton woman, sir—she had the audacity to call upon Anna. The Rev. Preble would not turn her away. He told me himself that he considered it an opportunity of reproaching Miss Eton for the evilness of her life, and that she listened with great interest. And I, sir, suspect with great amusement."

"Preble must be a fool," said Hales.

"If so, sir, it is the foolishness of a flaming and righteous man—"

Judge Deering then told him that the town talked of but little else than the mask ball which Monsieur Max was giving in his Golden House on the following evening; an invitational affair, for on this one night of the year money could not buy admittance to the Hall of Pleasure.

"I have some tickets here, none of which I shall use—" he groped absently about his desk without finding them—"but if you care to attend—"

"Not I," said Hales.

WHEN John Taylor came, Hales put him on a horse and sent him through the mist and mud to El Crucifijo, and himself slept that night in Judge Deering's office.

In the morning the weather had changed. The air was clear, the sun warm. The city buzzed, but not altogether happily. Hales was told that every river steamer from the interior was crowded with people returning from the diggings. The roads to the mines had become impassable for freighters. Provisions could not be hauled in. Merchants were abandoning camp stores. Miners were starved into returning to the

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cities. People said that the flush times were over. Gold was playing out. California would soon be abandoned to the greasers. Shiftless grumblers and unlucky men who prophesy evil for others called an hour's ebbing of the tide disaster.

Shortly before noon Hales called on the Prebles to make inquiry for himself.

Ezekiel Preble, his wife and baby, occupied one room in the house of a preacher who had a church. Preble, faithful to the promise he had made the Lord, devoted himself to street preaching and lived on free-will offerings, most of which he gave away.

"Christians ort 'o be pore," was the frequent affirmation of Mrs. Preble.

The Rev. Preble, darkly bearded, tall, in shirt sleeves, rose from the table where he was reading from the Book and greeted Hales cordially as "brother."

Hales did not like him, did not like being called "brother." Preble had a perpetual ministerial intonation. There was a strong odor of sweat about him. He spoke of Anna as "our dear sister." Tears gushed from his eyes and his voice trembled as he lifted his eyes to the ceiling and asked God to care for her. He looked awkward. He irritated Hales.

"Let us pray," said Preble and dropped to his knees, lifted his clasped hands, and prayed for minutes. Mrs. Preble stood by with face downcast, holding the baby, which busily groped about her breast with tiny fingers, pulling at her nose, at her hair, flopping its arms.

Hales had to stand motionless and listen. He was uncomfortable, exasperated. When the prayer was finished the Rev. Preble stood up. His knees were covered with dust. He said that Anna had been saved, that he had prayed with her frequently; she had wept repentently and promised to enter the service of the Lord.

"He drove Anna to desperation," said Hales to himself.

While returning from the Prebles, Hales walked for a time in a sandy graded road. At the sound of trotting horses he glanced behind, then stepped aside.

Two women of the town were out for a ride in the spring-like sunshine. They were dressed in velvets and ribbands, and it was not until they had come almost up to him that he again glanced upwards and recognized the dark, perfectly modeled features of Elvira Eton.

She reined up sharply, lurching forward in the saddle a little because of the sudden stop, and, as if delighted to see him, exclaimed:

"Oh! Señor Hales! I have been wondering *where* you were. It is so lovely to see you, now!"

He glanced toward the other woman, who, having ridden a few feet passed Elvira, turned her horse about. She was young, evidently French, with painted cheeks, painted lips. Her mouth was very small.

"Señor, this is my *dear* friend, Mlle. Renault."

Mademoiselle Renault, or madame as she was more commonly known, smiled, and the two women exchanged quick glances.

"I have told Louise *so* much of you," said the good Dona, and smiled with a gleam of mocking pleasure in her dark eyes. "We were talking of you not ten minutes ago, were we not Louise?"

"Indeed, monsieur, less than that! Not more than five!" said Madame Renault in a sort of babyish voice. "Elvira speaks much of you. Indeed, monsieur!"

"We have been wishing, señor, that you could come to our mask ball tonight"—Dona Elvira leaned forward and stroked the neck of her horse, but kept her eyes on Hales; then, smiling, coaxingly— "You will come? It is a mask ball. Will you?"

"No," said Hales.

"Oh good, Louise! He is coming!" the Dona cried happily toward her companion. "You have an invitation with you, Louise. Give it to me for Mr. Hales. It will be such a pleasure to have him."

Both women smiled upon Hales.

"No one is admitted without an invitation, Monsieur," said Madame Renault, crinkling her rosebud mouth at him as she took a card from her pocket and handed it across to Elvira, who then leaned forward, offering it to Hales.

"No," said Hales quietly, shaking his head and showing her the grimmest of stubborn smiles.

She ignored his attitude completely.

"Ah, señor, there will be many you know. My sweetest of friends, your dear sister will be there. Oh do come!"

The good Dona smiled triumphantly, thrusting forward the card, and Hales, with mechanical movement, reached out, took it, staring at her.

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"Good day, Senor Hales!"

"Good day, Monsieur!"

Both flashed parting smiles upon him and rode off at a gallop.

HALES went to Judge Deering and told him. Judge Deering leaned back heavily in his chair, casting aside the newspaper he had been reading, and ran the palm of his hand over his bald head. Gravely, as if pronouncing the findings of a magistrate, he said:

"The devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape. From a safe distance, sir, I have upon occasion admired the beauty with which she cloaks a wolfish evilness. For no other reason, sir, than sheer wantonness and perhaps to spite our friend Preble, she had lured that poor woman back to riotousness."

"If Anna's brothers were not here I doubt if I would now try to find her. Heaven knows I don't want to see her again. But I'm going—you 'd better come with me to this mask affair, Judge."

"No. No. My blood, sir," he said gravely, "is too old to yield to many of the weaknesses my flesh may have retained." Then, with rising interest and sonorous tone, "But all the wild and grotesque phases of the Californian life interest me profoundly—as a spectacle, sir, only as a spectacle.

"Here, sir, in this city we are passing through a phase of heroic barbarism, Homeric, or more nearly, sir, in some aspects, Elizabethan—Elizabethan, when men who ventured greatly and singed the beards of kings spent plundered wealth in revelries where bejeweled women and burly courtiers in velvets drank themselves dead and fell vomiting on the rushes that served to cover their floors.

"Here in our city men with muddy boots, boots on feet, sir, that have trampled across a continent, stamp over silken rugs; and hands calloused from swinging picks stroke the dainty fingers of sinuously fierce and bejeweled women, while all merriment is noise, riot and drunkenness.

"Our city, sir, is rude, strong, turbulent, full of those contrasts that denote barbarism. For ten thousand years a turbulent adventurous vanguard has led our people Westward from the Asiatic cradle that rocked the new-born race of the Caucasian, and here the march of Empire ends. Here, sir, in California ends that great migration of the Caucasian people. There are no longer unknown lands and wildernesses before them. Here, sir, the swarming caravans of Man will pile up in dense communities, spread out, with a flowing movement press backward on to the country through which they have come. Here sir, along the western coast of America is where God has drawn his finger and said, 'No farther! Stand and fulfill your destiny!' Here, sir, Destiny begins the final chapter in the history of the white race; and we, sir, we barbarians in this year of our Lord, 1849, are merely the vanguard that has reached the last outpost.

"The rudeness and noise of our new land, its strength and its weaknesses, its evil aspects and its virtues, its orgies in the houses of the harlot, its hymns and prayers in the rough-hewn houses of God on the hillsides—all this, sir, is but the preliminary scribblings on the great scroll of a new center of civilization. Sir, the flood of the future beats upon these shores!".

XXII

SHORTLY after nine o'clock, Hales appeared among a small group of odd fellows, a big Pierrot with deep voice and a beard showing under the mask, a small pudgy, heavily furred bear, a Chinaman, a Turk, that advanced from the muddy street over an improvised side walk to the doorway of Monsieur Max's Golden House where holiday revelry was to make merry the Christmas-tide.

Dancing, music and dining were free. The guests were expected to pay for wine. Monsieur Max was no fool or philanthropist. Champagne at this time was $10 the bottle.

No one was admitted unless in costume, masked, and provided with an invitation. For days the tailors of the town had been busy fashioning costumes. Some women of the town had also been invited so that no man would be unattended by a charmer.

Hales, because the costume was almost natural to him, had purchased the dress of a Spanish gentleman.

As they were admitted through the street door the maskers entered a small room where attendants announced:

"Now gentlemen, please remove your

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weapons and let us put them away for you. No weapons will be permitted in the ball room!"

Such was the ruling of Monsieur Max; and this seemed so excellent a precedent that for years afterwards invitation cards to mask balls bore the words—"No weapons admitted."

Hales, with holster empty, followed the big, bearded Pierrot, whom he recognized as Wallace B. Kern, into the ball room, into the midst of gay voices and skirling laughter.

Pine boughs had been placed about the room, and on the boughs cotton. Strings of popcorn and glass beads were festooned. Candelabras blazed with the upward streaming points of candles. Curtains of red silk hung at the windows. The walls were covered with a gaudy paper and on the walls were pictures and mirrors in heavy frames. On a low platform, thinly screened by boughs, were fiddlers. On the opposite side of the room was a huge fireplace. Wood was forty dollars a cord. The carpets had been removed and the floor waxed with melted candles. Negroes passed about serving drinks—when ordered. Snow was brought down from the mountains by teamsters for chilling the drinks.

Hales entered amid a storm of confetti. Monsieur Max had bought up almost every scrap of colored paper in the city, and hired it cut into tiny squares.

Every one was masked excepting the fiddlers, the servants and Monsieur Max himself who bustled about pudgily, waving his sparkling hands, feeling daintily of the crinkled ends of his heavy black mustache, and talking merrily. Every little while he would blaze with a wordy torrent of excitement, over nothing, spluttering; the next instant he would be bowing to some huge gargoyle of a masker or flashing badinage at a girl.

It was a little dazzling, so many women in a womanless region, all gaily costumed in fluttering silks and close-clinging velvets; none were more than half-masked, for they were beautiful young girls, and would not wholly hide their faces. Their red lips rippled with shrill merriment; their slippered feet were light, tongues bantering. It was early in the evening, all were gay, none more than slightly drunken.

A small creature in a maze of gauze thrust an artificial flower into Hales' face and laughed, saying, "Buy me a drink?" A handful of confetti showered upon him. He looked backward at who had thrown it, and when he faced about the bearded Pierrot had captured the gauze-girl.

Hales pushed toward Monsieur Max, caught his arm, asked—

"When do these people unmask?"

"Midnight, Monsieur!"

The fiddlers struck up. A woman glided toward Hales, with arms out. He did not open his arms to receive her.

"You are cold, Mr. Spanish Bandit—but I love you!"

"You," said Hales, "are thirsty."

She laughed and struck his cheek lightly with her fingers. Hales stopped a waiter, saying: "Champagne."

Behind him Hales recognized the voice of Col. Nevinson, but did not look around.

Nevinson was dressed as a courtier, wore a narrow strip of velvet across his face, his mustache was stiffly waxed. He carried an empty scabbard. The attendants had removed his sword.

The woman by Hales drank quickly and left him. He was a dull companion. A moment later the bearded Pierrot, laughing heartily, half stumbled against him and was quickly apologetic.

"Entirely all right, Mr. Kern."

"Ah! You know me. And you?"

"Hales."

They shook hands.

"Great fun, eh? Lord, I'm being a fool tonight, and like it!" Kern laughed deeply. "Ever see so many beautiful ladies?"

"Never so many dangerous ones."

"Same thing. Oh there, see? The colonel and the Dona! That woman could send a desert saint to hell!"

Col. Nevinson and a woman in the dress of a Spanish dancer were on the floor. Hales would hardly have recognized her as Elvira. She was sinuously lithe and alert, and tossed her head with coquettish flare.

Another couple spun by. Hales looked after the woman, catching merely the glimpse of a laughing red streak on a heavily painted and powdered face, half hidden by its mask. She wore a strange costume of brilliant rags and tatters, and danced with the pudgy bear, who must have been sweating like a Turk at his bath under such a woolly dress.

Corks were popping like a mild Fourth of

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July celebration. Each pop meant $10. Monsieur Max was ecstatically excited. A supper had been spread in the next room. The doors would be opened at midnight.

"Let's have a bottle," said Hales to Kern.

"What, alone? Two men! We'd be thrown headfirst into the mud. I'll get some girls."

"—— the girls. It's the drink I want."

But Kern had rushed off, and at that moment the beautiful Spanish dancer came to Hales.

"Señor," she said sweetly, "the fandango, with me?"

Hales answered in Spanish—

"I do not know it."

"You lie to me, señor," she said amiably. "Yes, Señor Hales, you do know it as I know your voice. Dance with me, just one little time. Then I will tell you which is—ah—your *sister!* Ah, how you have been cruel to me!"

"Twelve o'clock will come soon enough to find out. And why, why did you do it when you knew her friends were trying to pull her up and out?"

"Ah ah ah," said Elvira with mockery, yet sweetly, "she was *so* unhappy there! And that preacher-man, I wanted to show him that I, the wicked one—oh how he *talked* to me of sins!—had more power than his prayers. And you, Señor Hales, I too have the wish that I could hate you!" She said it seductively as if reluctantly confessing. "But it can not be!"

"You 've done enough to show you do," said Hales.

"I? No señor! You do not know me if you think that. You will learn what my hate is like—some day." There was a click of teeth between her smiling lips. She glanced aside. Hales followed the glance and saw that she looked at Nevinson. "But señor, this dance. I beg it—I, a woman, beg it! Come, let us show these gringos how Spaniards dance!"

"I do not know it."

"Señor," she said, half menacing, half playful, "the reason I forget some things between us is because you, cruel man, have never lied to me! You lie now, ah?"

"No."

"Truth?"

"Truth."

"I believe you, always, yes." She was warmly seductive, wooing him with glance and tone. "Then I dance alone, and show you how I can dance. I will teach you some day, if you wish. You wish, señor?"

"Dance," said Hales.

"Then will I come for your answer, eh?"

She fluttered her fan, smiled over it, and her glance was piercing as the note of a siren song. Then she spun away, spoke to Monsieur Max, who instantly exploded into delight and rushed toward the musicians.

Kern was swinging by with a shepherdess to his breast. The mouth of the shepherdess was small as a rosebud and red. Hales caught at Kern's arm—

"Stop a minute. Listen."

"Run off and play," said Kern to the pouting shepherdess. "This is business. I'm going to borrow some money." Then to Hales: "What is it? I'm nearly drunk so I may be imagining things, but you sound scared!"

Kern was not the only one who was nearly drunk; a few there were who were nearly sober. Laughter was higher, movement more abandoned. Confetti stormed about the heads of the dancers. As much champagne was being spilled as drunk. And the lurching wantonness of wayward women made men more drunken than with wine.

"Here—" Hales pulled Kern nearer the wall—"You know what I think of Nevinson, but—"

"Aw listen, now listen," Kern cut in with paternal soothing. "Forget it, Hales. We're all good fellows here tonight. The old colonel's in a financial pickle too—done for. Night like this, don't bring up old scores. Be a good fellow, grab a girl, tell world go to ——!"

"You do the listening," said Hales abruptly. "And you or somebody warn him against that Eton woman. I don't know what she's up to, but—"

Kern laughed uproariously, patting him on the shoulder—

"You 're in love with her, too, heh? That's not a fair way to take her from the colonel—try to scare him off. He don't scare worth a ——. I saw her just now playin' the siren with you. Maybe you can get her away from the colonel—"

"You are drunk!" said Hales.

Kern, laughing full-throated, staggered off, snatched at a girl, caught her, swung her upon his shoulder and staggered across the room.

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THE floor was cleared of dancers. The fiddlers struck up, softly. There was the silken flash of a woman's body and Elvira appeared in the center of the room. Her castanets clicked, her dainty heels struck sharply, then with a swirl of skirts she spun lithely into the dance.

From the first it was plain that she danced for the approval of the tall darkly masked man in Spanish costume who stood by the bearded Pierrot. All eyes turned repeatedly toward Hales, who folded his arms and tried to appear indifferent.

Col. Nevinson eyed him, and presently the colonel came to the side of Pierrot, who had returned near Hales. Nevinson asked—peremptorily—

"Who is that fellow?"

And for the fun of it, Kern answered—

"Don Sebastien de Gorgora—old friend of hers—from Cuba."

"—— greaser!" said the colonel in a voice that must be overheard.

Then as Elvira glided closely by Hales, smiling, with head thrown back, hands to waist, her sinuous body bent enticingly to lure him out on the floor after her, his anger at the word "greaser" died away with a shiver, chilled by the feeling that this woman knew what she was doing, knew she was filling the air with jealousy, that a quarrel would follow. Hales was determined that for all of her passionate artfulness, there would be no quarrel. He disliked Nevinson intensely, but had no downright hate of him.

The maskers watched. She, whose habitual pose was sinuously slothful, could dance brilliantly.

As they watched, waiters passed along bearing glasses on trays. Men were buying drinks for everybody, treating the house. Monsieur Max might well have gone off to a lone mirror and winked at himself.

The gay masqueraders laughed; many were a little unsteady; they shouted compliments at Elvira, and comment rippled merrily.

"When 's she 's done, I'll do a Bowery!" shouted a woman's harsh voice, stridently.

Monsieur Max was standing near. He said something to her. She was the woman in gay rags and tatters.

Angered by what he had said she cried at him—

"I'm more of a lady than any woman here, I am!"

He waved his bejeweled hands placatingly, puffed "Shh's" at her, anxiously; and a man by her side also spoke soothingly. The woman shrank back, sulking.

"Anna!" said Hales, doubtful, yet nearly certain, and stared across at her—a thing of brilliant rags and tatters, as if with ironical symbolism she had chosen such a dress. Her face was half clouded with black velvet, her lips were an unhealed wound, her face powdered as if with the dust that Death brings.

Something very like nausea touched him. He felt weak. Memories with vivid swiftness crossed his mind: Her early girlhood—one Spring day they had broken off apple blossoms in the orchard together, both then mere children, and he had loved her then almost as much as his brother afterward. He had gone to a far country, California, and returned on a visit. The marriage in an old vine-covered church, while his sister played the organ, and its deep rolling notes seemed to linger among the high oaken rafters. His brother and this woman! These things came upon him so that he stood as if in a daze, staring at her, but looking backward across the years.

He gradually became aware that there was a sort of hush coming over the room, though the castanets rattled furiously and Elvira spun in the last swirling of her dance. Hales, coming out of what was nearly a daze, noticed that no one was watching her. He glanced toward where the others were looking.

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How the YOUNG ONES DIE*

by
CLAUDE FARRÈRE
translated by
LEO ONGLEY

THEIR turn comes early sometimes, the turn of the young ones. To die, I mean.

Ensigns and subalterns, little fellows with a single gold stripe on their sleeves, or maybe two; lads who were in the *École Navale* yesterday and in prep school the day before. I wish you knew how they face it, that last moment. The worst of it is, it isn't always a moment, but hours, sometimes days—nights.

It's about one of those young ones of ours I'd like to tell you. It won't take long. Will you listen?

You know the *Wagram?* One of the Republic's ironclads; the one Admiral Cheftel ran his flag up on last May? Well, it was on board the *Wagram.*

The fourth squadron of the line was having its regular target practise. There were three ships to a division, and each division took its turn firing at the double row of marks ten thousand yards away. The *Wagram*—she was the rear admiral's flagship—was classed with her two sister ships from the same yards, the *Hohenlinden* and the *Auerstaedt.* I happened to be on board one of the third light squadron cruisers, the *Convention.*

As artillery officer, I had permission to go on board any one of the armored ships of the line—the *Wagram* was my choice—to observe the target practise. There's always something to learn at a target practise, even when you've seen a few dozen of them, as I have.

But, to be brief: The first turn was over. All three ironclads had fired their starboard guns at the mark without incident. They deployed to come back to their places in line and fire off their port guns. I and the other passenger-officers were free to take up a position anywhere we pleased on the ship, provided, of course, we didn't get in the way.

I was lying on a coil of rope close to gun-turret number six, a lateral ten-inch turret that hadn't spoken a word yet, since it was on the port side. And so, when the bugles rang "load guns to port," I saw the gun-crew, on reserve duty until then, run up the turret ladder.

As I glanced at the chief ensign I recognized him, and even remembered his name—Jean Scherrer. He was just a lad, twenty-two or twenty-four maybe, but to look at him you'd think he was a bare fifteen. Yellow-haired he was, and pink and pudgy, and just as much hair on his chin as on your naked knee. At sight of him, you couldn't help thinking of those pretty little fellows that are always swatting tennis balls around the courts at Puteaux.

I had run into him several times in the Toulon saloons—the Guinea Hen and other places. And I couldn't help noticing him because he always had the same girl with him, and that's not the custom exactly with ensigns who are very wary of that kind of monotony.

Jean Scherrer's girl was a nice little thing, besides. Cut out for him, you might say.

**An Off-the-Trail story, see first contents page.*

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She looked so completely the twelve-year-old that, alongside of her, young Scherrer seemed almost grown up. It was funny to see them together, so funny, it never occurred to anybody to take them seriously.

Well, as I was saying, I saw young Scherrer about to run up the ladder, helter-skelter, with his sailors, and I stopped him short, just the time of a hand-shake.

"That you, my boy? This your ship? I didn't know it. How's everything?"

"Right enough, Captain! And yourself? So you came to see what our guns can do, eh? It's going to be a fine show, you just bet your money on it! Got your stop-watch with you? Get a record of the time, will you, between the first shot and the sixth?"

He shook hands with me and, like a squirrel, scurried into the black hole of the turret door. It closed on him quick as a trap. I picked up my binoculars and once more began sweeping the horizon to find the marks that I'd lost on account of the smoke. I remember I was smiling to myself, tickled to see the boy in such high spirits, so proud of his marksmanship, and his cannon, and so much in love with his gun-turret. It even occurred to me that his girl would have had some reason to be jealous if she had heard him.

THEN the port guns began to show what they could do. There's no dawdling about target practise! The admiral's ship had run up its emblem—red with white squares—and her two sister ships followed suit. The flag-ship fired the first shot, and then the terrific roar of the division's thirty big guns going off together a moment later fairly knocked me senseless.

Above me I had seen the two long flames of Scherrer's 240s. He had asked me to count the seconds, and I did. I counted nineteen. Handsome enough, as a record! Not even the Germans could do so well as that—at least not every day.

"Jean Scherrer has the right to feel proud," I thought to myself, "for all he's such a kid. Nineteen seconds, to load and fire a 240! Well, that's what you might call giving your country good service!"

The two flames again spat out their projectiles, and again I began to count. But, just as I reached six, I noticed, in spite of the unbroken thunder of the firing, the ghastly sputtering of a cannon cartridge fuse inside the turret. In a flash, even before the fatal *fchuuuuu* had stopped, I knew what it meant. Powder up to its old tricks again. A charge catching all by itself, and a gun crew and officer locked into a hermetically sealed box in which sixty pounds of gunpowder were aflame. God! What a horror!

The targets were already at half-mast. The firing had ceased. Out there on the sea, where the long yellow and gray smoke streaks—a mixture of powder and coal—still straggled, the three iron-clads were floating as peaceably as an hour before. You might have said nothing had changed.

And at last the turret door opened and I saw the first man out stagger down the steps. He was black, his flesh burned to charcoal, and red with blood, streaming. Behind him the others— No, I'll not attempt to describe them to you. What use? If you had seen them, you would never, never, never be able to get that grisly sight out of your eyes! And if you had heard them howl, all of them together, the same inarticulate howl that tried in vain to be a cry, a prayer; that tried to say something—

"Ah! Ah! Water!"

That was what they were trying to ask for, water!

But they couldn't say it. It hurt too much to move their tongues and lips and make the syllables! If you had heard those screams, I tell you, you would continue to hear them the rest of your life, in every sound, in every silence, and even in sleep, for they would break out of your most ghastly nightmares.

As for Jean Scherrer, he was the last out, as you would expect. No howl from him, though he had had the worst of it. The wounds he brought with him out of that explosion chamber had finished him, that goes without saying. Just the same he stalked out holding himself very straight and stiff. His clothes, skin, bones, they were all the same substance now—just plain charcoal! He looked like a corpse that's been dead a long time.

He came towards me. Before reaching me—I couldn't move, I was paralyzed with horror—he looked at his men.

"Silence!" he commanded them.

They stopped the noise they were making. Dead men though they were, they had to obey that leader of theirs. I remember how

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I wanted to kneel down then and there in front of them—in front of those men and in front of him, their leader.

Two paces away, Jean Scherrer stopped and looked at me. By what miracle his sight had been preserved I don't know. His eyes alone had not been charred.

And then he said to me:

"I'm done for. No matter. But, Captain—for God's sake, listen! On my word of honor, it wasn't the men's fault. There was no negligence—not their fault!"

He moved his head ever so slightly towards his sailors, to call my attention to them. They were silent now, and I could tell from the way he looked at them that he could have cried over the poor devils if he had been able to cry.

"My boys," he said again.

Then he had a thought for himself.

"Captain, you know her, don't you? Nini? Will you bring her to the hospital to see me? Because I shan't croak before tomorrow night—that's the way it goes if you come out of these things alive. It takes thirty-six hours then to finish up the job. I know—I've seen it before—"

Then, to himself, I heard him mutter—

"——, how it burns!"

He stumbled, and I held out an arm to catch him.

But, with a jerk, he straightened once more, and curtly gave orders to those other men who, like himself, were dying.

"Come on, boys, to the infirmary. Single file, left!"

And, unaided, while his men were being carried in, he marched to the hospital ward.

AS HE had foreseen, Jean Scherrer lived all that day and all night and a part of the following day. I got to the hospital about noon.

Needless to say I brought Nini with me. Poor Nini! She wasn't much to look at by that time, her little face just a wreck with all those tears.

I've seen a lot of women cry. In our line of life men are always dying, and often so young! But that Nini girl—I don't know that I ever felt so sorry for any one in my life as I did for her. She was so little, such a baby! To see grief take hold of her like that, it didn't seem fair! It seemed a rotten trick to play on a helpless little kid.

Just the same, no sooner was Nini inside the hospital than she gulped down her tears and smiled, bravely.

"So as not to scare him," she explained.

Poor Scherrer couldn't even kiss her, bandaged as he was from his hair to his toenails. There was just a little hole left in that bundle of bandages, so his voice could get out. He was as good as six feet under the sod already! All the same he vowed—he almost managed a laugh too—that in six weeks he'd be out of his cocoon. And he jollied poor Nini, telling her he'd have such dreadful scars when he got well that he thought probably she wouldn't love him any more! And by ——! To hear those two kid-lovers lying to one another like that, just to spare each other a few tears, why, it made me want to jump out of the window!

When the girl had gone, another visitor came in—Cheftel, the admiral—bringing the Croix de Guerre. The Minister of War had telegraphed that it had been awarded.

I can still see the admiral's white mustache quivering as, without a word, he opened the little red morocco box and pinned the red ribbon on the white bandages muffling Jean Scherrer's chest.

It was Jean who spoke.

"Thanks, Admiral! But—say, it's hardly worth while giving it to me, is it? Wish you'd give it to my quarter master instead—He has some chance of pulling through—and he'd like it. What's the use giving it to me? Even for the funeral, it will just be wasted—because they'll give us national honors anyway. Thanks, just the same, Admiral—from my heart—and you too, Captain—special thanks— So-long, gentlemen."

Inside the hour he was dead.

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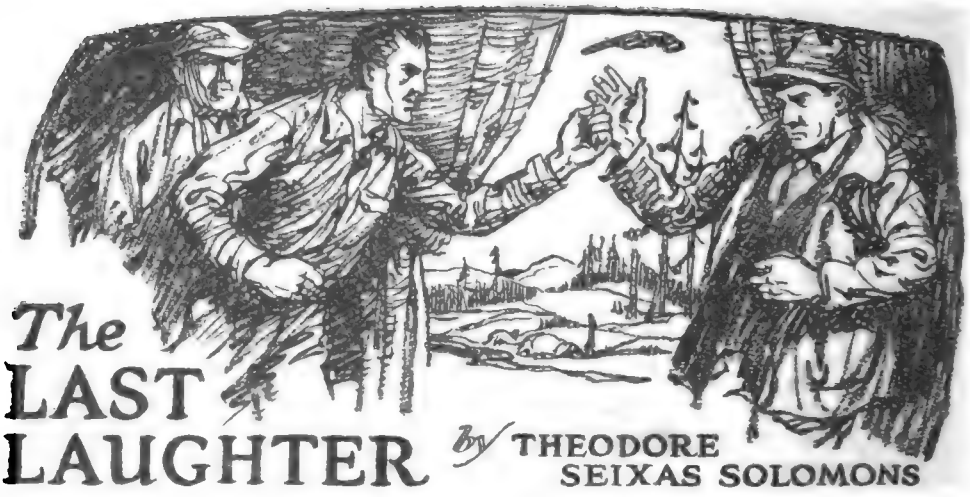

The LAST LAUGHTER

By THEODORE SEIXAS SOLOMONS

Author of "The Invincible Tradition," "Jeff the Guesser," etc.

A SODDEN, shivering figure burdened with a pack crouched outside a small, dirty tent-shack, his ear to the wet canvas, listening intently.

A weak luminance of candle-light shone within. Two men were conversing. The voice of one was smooth, quiet, high-bred. The tone and accent were unmistakably British.

"Beastly, this rain," said the voice. "I say, old chap, it isn't going to stop our mining, is it?"

"Well, now, I shouldn't wonder if it would," the second voice replied.

Whereat the face of the listener without betrayed instant recognition. He thrust his head lower. His brows drew.

It was a cool, drawling voice, with spaces of silence—pipe puffs, these. "I told you the first fall rains might finish us. That dam isn't any too strong, Edgar. I've a notion to go on up with a shovel and strengthen any weak spots before the water rises too much."

"Oh, my dear fellow, don't bother," returned the other voice heartily. "A bit of work with a shovel isn't going to avail if this rain continues. The ditch won't take half the water, you know."

"But I'd like to widen that cross-cut and get a little more gold before we quit, old man. Ten thousand isn't very much!"

The reply was cordial.

"I know you would, deah fellow. Well, go ahead. For myself—" There was a sleepy yawn. "I'm well content with the prospect. You've shown up all you promised and more. I'm quite sure my company will be well pleased!"

"I should think they would," came the drawling voice with quiet emphasis. "Just the same I think I'll get into my slicker and see what I can do. Where's that lantern?"

The listening man seemed to take these words as a warning signal. He rose painfully to his height, which was great in spite of the enforced stoop due to the pack, and betook himself to the cover of trees at the river bank. He watched the tent-shack, and when the flap of canvas that answered for a door had opened and emitted the figure of the miner, the watcher waited until he had seen the man seize a shovel that leaned against the shack and walk rapidly up the river bank. Then he divested himself of his pack, stepped across the noiseless, mossy sod to the shack, turned, walked straight to the river and examined a large cottonwood that overhung the now dry bed of the stream.

That is, he felt its bark with his hands at the height of his face. Before doing this he had been careful to stand next to the tree with his right hand over the water, his left extended toward the shack. His fingers moved expectantly along the bark—sidewise, then up and down.

A low whistle of surprize came from his lips. Then he felt in his pocket for matches, glancing apprehensively toward the tent before attempting to strike one. It failed—

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his trousers were wet. He selected another and reached inside of his tattered slicker for a dry fabric-surface. When the match flared, he shielded the flame from sight on the shack side and glared at the bark of the cottonwood. The flare of the match corroborated the testimony of his fingers—the bark was unmarked! A longer whistle of surprize and perplexity followed. The man walked rapidly back to where he had left his pack, inserted his arms in its straps and plodded on down the river.

At noon that day, from an eminence of the low, rounded ridge by which he had approached this river, he had caught his first glimpse of the cottonwood-fringed stream and of the tent-shack. He had expected to see them—the stream and the shack. But not the men he had seen working there, not the Chinese pump whose skinny outline the miner in him had recognized for what it was, nor the piles of gravel up-flung, nor the line of ditch paralleling the stream. These were not only unexpected. They were wholly disconcerting. So much so, indeed, that he had waited for night to make this stealthy visit to the tent-shack where he had learned several things that were comprehensible and one, at the cottonwood tree, that was wholly incomprehensible!

It was this incomprehensible thing that now drove him through the cold drizzle of the Arctic September night to a little group of Eskimo igloos at the mouth of the river, two miles away. Here, in pidgin English, he interrogated Ticktock, whom he knew to have been owner of the tent-shack up the river.

Two white men, Ticktock said, were working there on the river. They had come one moon before. They paid *monik*—money—and *plow*—flour—to himself and his three friends who had helped them dig. The tent-shack and the cottonwood opposite? In a dozen words Ticktock changed puzzlement into enlightenment; and the man with the pack slapped his thigh and whistled. Then he marveled—and in that state of mind partook of native hospitality and went to sleep.

Half an hour after the darkness had swallowed him, the man with the lantern returned to the shack and made considerable stir in preparing for his bunk. A quite unnecessary amount of stir and noise one might have thought it, unless his clumsy overturning of a galvanized-iron bucket was mere inadvertence. It was this sound after several lesser ones had been ineffective, that awoke his fellow occupant of the tent.

"Oh, back, old man?" the Britisher asked, sitting bolt upright. "What luck?"

The other shrugged as he pulled off his mucklucks—

"Stopped it for awhile in one place, then it broke out in another, and—"

"Dam going to go, you think?"

"Looks mighty like it."

"Let it go, deah fellow. The gold's there. It won't get away. Talk it over in the morning."

Wearily he settled down again and was soon in deep sleep.

The other man continued his undressing very deliberately. He washed his face and hands. He was neat, almost dapper, with a pale face and well chiseled features. He applied the towel thoughtfully, listening for rain-drops, his head turned, cocked toward the low roof of the tent. If the drizzle, which was noiseless, should turn to rain his ears would catch the sound of it no matter how light the showers. He heard no sound.

He threw a clean wool shirt over his head for a nightshirt, the air being cold. He read a bit in an old magazine, listlessly. Then, glancing at his sleeping companion, he moved impatiently toward the doorway, opened the flap and gazed at the sky. It was starlit!

"—— it!" he exclaimed in a low voice.

Disgustedly he got into his bunk and went to sleep.

The eavesdropper of the night before slept long next morning, for he had come far and his pack had been heavy. The Eskimo men were gone. He, too, left when he had breakfasted, after pressing into the creased brown hand of the old Eskimo wife who served him a silver dollar.

He took his way back to the region of his last night's spying, but by a route that avoided the tent-shack, and fetched the river several miles above that small, forlorn habitation. The tundra world was asparkle. The near-by Arctic divide bristled with new white teeth, but the billows of mildly contoured hills that led to it were all bare, save for the river's fringe of cottonwood.

Up and down the bank the man with the pack made his search, keeping a distance of

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some twenty feet from the river. This was the distance at which stood the tent-shack, half a mile below. Soon the man stopped, satisfied, it seemed, with what he had found. His find consisted of some chips and a bit of excavation, trench-like, as though poles had been imbedded in a square.

HE NOW went straight to the river's edge, to a large cottonwood, and there, standing with his right hand toward the stream, he gazed at a faint mark of "W," made with a knife-blade on the tree's bark.

"That's her!" he exclaimed aloud, satisfied. "Then it's *true!* Well, what do you know about that!"

He blinked repeatedly his small, twinkling blue eyes. These were surrounded by many work and worry made crow's-feet, though the man himself, large, hearty, jovial looking, belied the character of the worrisome person.

When he saw mining-stakes he nodded understandingly—and laughed derisively when, approaching one, he read upon the notice, "Edgar H. Fawncrest, Agent." He laughed derisively again—and scowled—when he found, as he walked on down the river, that every alternate claim was staked in the name of Lawrence Levoy.

"You cunnin' swindler—you wait!" he muttered to himself.

Suddenly he came to a dam thrown rudely across a narrow part of the channel. Curious, he walked out upon it. He knew dams in the north—tundra sods, muck, interlacing willow switches for "binders." It was this knowledge that made him scrutinize the work, and look closer at it in two places.

Again the derisive laughter—and a muttered curse. He resumed his way down the stream.

As he approached the tent-shack and the mining work opposite it, though it was broad day, now, he neither skulked nor spied. He walked right on toward the camp in plain sight of the two white men who stood directing the Eskimos or talking with each other.

"Hullo! Here's a white man," warned Fawncrest, who happened to be facing up-stream. "We don't want him to know what we've got here. What'll we do?"

The other turned and studied the approaching, pack-burdened figure. He held his eyes upon him a long time before he answered in his drawling way:

"Bluff him, of course. Leave it to me!"

They stood coolly, watching the oncoming man. The latter, approaching, gave them an off-hand, "Hullo, boys!" divested himself of his pack and came up to them. He looked at the pale, tall, drawler—full in the face.

"Hullo, Larry!" he said.

"Larry" looked him over casually, while the two other men studied his face. Fawncrest expected to see dawn upon it some slow recognition, for the greeting of the stranger had been crisp and positive.

But no recognition came—not even that subtle puzzlement that implies a hazy vague recollection of something once familiar.

"Larry's my name—to those that know me intimately," came the reply coldly. "But—I'll say you've got the best of me!"

The newcomer looked him in the eye and laughed oddly. He had half raised his hand as though to be ready to shake hands should the other offer. But he let it fall to his side.

"Well, well!" was all he said at first, as the two gazed at each other. Then: "You sure do favor a man I knew once. Excuse me, pardner!"

A strange look crept into the cold, steady eyes of Larry at this utterance, a flicker of non-comprehension passed over his mask-like poker face. Then, at once, at a question shot in by Fawncrest, his eyelids twitched.

It was just a curious, off-hand, natural question.

"What was the name of the man you took him for, my dear fellow?"

The stranger watched the twittering lids of the man he had mistaken. Then, without taking his eyes from Larry's face, he replied—

"Reckon I never knew the right name to call him by."

Instantly the flickering of the lids ceased, and Larry's hand went out. "Lawrence Levoy's my name, pardner. And yours?"

"Robert Whitaker, generally called 'Bob,'" was the prompt reply, accompanied by a broad grin.

The two shook hands.

"Quite a coincidence, that 'Larry.' No? What?" remarked Fawncrest. "Eh-h—where going, my man?"

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"Oh, kinder prospectin' around," replied Whitaker, broadly, taking in the dun landscape with a sweeping gesture. "Looks like you fellers struck somethin'."

Fawncrest glanced at Levoy who answered drawlingly:

"Sure—rich. Finest collection of fly-speck colors in Alaska. Found a cent or two at first in bits you could weigh, and my friend here got excited and insisted on putting these Siwashes to work turning the river. There wasn't much water in it—didn't take long."

"And you didn't find much, hey?"

"Sure!" Levoy's face wreathed itself in a sardonic smile. "Finest collection of fly-speck colors—you know 'em, pardner, if you're a prospector in this forsaken country—one billion makes one cent, a hundred billions makes one dollar. We're about through, I guess!"

"Tough luck," replied Whitaker sympathetically, though his little blue eyes went on twinkling. "No objection, I suppose, to my restin' awhile around here?" Again the broad gesture.

Here the Englishman spoke, fearing too curt a response from his partner.

"Delighted, my dear fellow, and all that. But fact is we're rather short on rations—feeding these Eskimo fellows, you see. So, if you have far to go and want to conserve your supplies, as it were, I really couldn't advise you—"

"I get you, Mr—"

"Fawncrest!" supplied the other promptly.

"Pleased to meet you," said the miner, extending his hand.

He turned immediately to Levoy.

"As I was coming down the river, I didn't like the look of your dam, in one or two places. I'll show it to you if you like. Gimme a shovel and come with me."

"Want to take an Eskimo, too?" suggested Fawncrest.

"No, guess not," answered Levoy quickly.

"Mighty decent of you, Whitaker," acknowledged the Englishman as the two turned away, up the river.

When Larry Levoy and Bob Whitaker had reached a turn in the stream that hid them from the camp—this several hundred yards away—they paused by a kind of tacit understanding and broke their silence. Whitaker spoke first.

"Remarkable resemblance you have to a friend of mine—thought he was a friend, anyhow. ——, it's uncanny!"

Levoy scowled. "Cut it, Bob!" he growled.

"What's the big idea? Feel so rich with them billions in fly-speck colors you don't know old friends—give 'em the glassy stare in the presence of your swell pardners from London—tweeds, accent, "old fellah"—everything? You might at least have said: 'Yes, I know him. Used to be a valit of mine—creased my trousers every mornin' before I went muckin' down the shaft!'"

"Cut it, I said!" repeated Levoy threateningly. "Who the —— are you?"

Whitaker opened wider his blue eyes:

"Oh, that's it, is it? I see."

"That's it," agreed the other promptly. "Who are you? Maybe crazy. Nobody knows I know you or you me. Nobody—no white man, anyhow—saw us together that time. My word's as good as yours."

Whitaker noticed that the hands of the man who seemed now to know him well were in his mackinaw coat pockets. An idea came to him—for experimental purposes.

"I might kill you, Larry!"

"And you might not, Bob."

He made a significant slight movement of his right hand.

"I MIGHT kill you later on—sometime. I never did take kindly to bein' robbed. Especially not by men I've befriended."

Levoy's lip curled.

"You make a lot out of taking a few pounds of mine on that old skate, and having somebody to talk to on a long hike—and somebody to help you camp—and drag that —— cayuse over every snow-water gulch from here to the Koyukuk. I worked!"

There was a self-righteousness in the voice.

"Oh, that part of it's all right. I was glad enough to give you a lift for your comp'ny. But this trick you played me!"

"Now listen to reason, Bob!" Levoy's manner became at once argumentatively placatory. "The gold was as good as lost. Who would ever, without he got backing, try to get it? Of course you said you was going to get it. What was the chance of you ever doing it?"

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"I told you I had to," reminded Whitaker doggedly.

Levoy shrugged gracefully.

"There wasn't much chance—I thought."

"And you hated to see it go to waste, huh?"

Levoy smiled mirthlessly.

"That's it."

"How much did you get—you two?"

"Us 'two' nothing! Just me." Levoy cocked his head, as if he wished to make his answer precise. "I've got out, so far, about five thousand—four thousand eight hundred and seventy-five, I think the exact amount is—the dust reckoned at seventeen-fifty an ounce."

Whitaker was staring at him. Then it was really true—the seeming marvel. His attitude, his inner attitude, changed completely, but it was only slowly that he permitted it to change outwardly.

"You say not the two of you?"

Levoy grew confidential. "You don't think, do you, I was going to let this —— Britisher in on the real thing, do you? They always got money to spend prospecting. He's one of these syndicate men. Mining engineer, he calls himself. Just an easy mark. If I didn't get him, somebody else would take him on. And I needed help of course, for you and me—"

"Oh, you intended to gimme some, did yer?"

Levoy looked hurt.

"Say, Whitaker, I'm not quite that mean. Sure I intended to divide with you—if I ever could locate you, or you should come back."

"And how about the Englishman? How much'll he be out?"

"Oh, barring his hurt feelings over the first song and dance I gave him, he won't come out so bad. Naturally, we've been paying the natives in gold dust. He'll only be out his time. And the shock may hurt him some, but I guess he won't die!"

"Meaning he thinks he's got a bonanza!"

Levoy smiled his mirthless smile—

"Sure! Can you blame him?"

Whitaker slowly shook his head:

"Quite natural," he agreed, dryly. "Five thousand out of ten or fifteen linear feet of a river that you and him's got staked from —— to breakfast! He must feel way up in G!"

"But when he finds out—"

"Yes, I was thinkin' of that. When he finds out—when it suddenly chops—"

"Unless the dam breaks, or something—I don't mind telling you I've been worried about that. I'd rather leave a lot in the river—and take it out some other time, maybe, with or without him—than be around here when the pay suddenly chops, on a nice straight line across, too. That'll look bad. I want to be away! A broken dam and water flooding us out would give me a jim-dandy excuse. Without that, though—"

"I get you, Larry," interrupted Whitaker sententiously. He was thinking of the dam, what he had seen there. He began to understand it all, and his next words were very carefully chosen.

"Without that, though, you've got to have some other. Well, I guess I could be the excuse. If I thought that you never intended to gyp me—well, you sure seem to be actin' on the square with me. And as far as this here engineer goes—of course you had to pull some one in to help you take out that gold; and I reckon he can stand it easier than most. So I will be the excuse for you, Larry, bein' as I'm profitin' by it, too. And I'll tell you what we'll do. I'm mentionin' the fact to you that half the town of Seattle is burnt out—news just in to Nome before I left. And you says, '—— 'lmighty! My home's there!' And you got to beat it quick. And providential, like, I'm the very man you need to give you the means to git out and stay out. I'm a dark horse! I'm sniffin' around the country, lousy with dough and lookin' to buy into new strikes. I'll tell him you've told me that you and him have got out five thousand dollars from that little, narrer cross-cut—"

"No, better tell him close to ten—that I told you close to ten! He'll understand I'm exaggerating to make better terms with you!"

Whitaker paused, biting his lip. Then his eyes gave forth their peculiar, understanding glint.

"I'll say ten. That's right. And that I've made a deal with you, subject to his bein' satisfied with me as a new pardner, 'stead of you—a deal turning over to me whatever interest you've got."

"I'm to get a half interest in all the claims we staked."

"And I'm givin' you a certified check for—oh, anything you like!"

Levoy snickered delightedly at the other's magnanimity.

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"Make it strong," he replied assentingly. "Call it fifty thousand dollars. I got a check book—an old one. He's never seen it. I'll pass it to you, now, before we go back to camp; and you can write the check in his presence—to make it strong! Of course, I'll slip it back to you when he's not looking."

"All right," agreed Whitaker willingly. "Anything to help out a friend!"

"There's just a few points you've got to keep in your nut, Bob," counseled the poker-faced man. "I'll tell him before we spring the deal together that I've sold out to you; and that I told you we had taken out ten thousand, to make it look better than it really is, although he thinks she's rich as Klondike, anyhow, and he won't think anything against me for exaggerating a little.

I'll tell him I've told you that in my deal with him in Nome before we came up here it was understood I was to have all the gold we took out this fall, less expenses, as well as a half interest in the claims we staked. So you don't need to have any talk with him about that end of it at all. And I'll hand you twenty-five hundred dollars. About half the other twenty-five hundred is expenses, which'll leave me only twelve hundred for all my time and work—and takin' chances on this cockney getting wise and making a terrible holler. Fair?"

"Fair," conceded Whitaker without a smile.

"Fine! Now I just tell him about the Seattle fire and how hard I took it, and claimed I'd just have to beat it, and you says, 'Hold on. Don't you want to get rid of your holdings here before you go?' And we made the deal. You can get him to make you out a deed to my share—he's got blanks and things. You know these Englishmen—travel with everything in their clumsy —— bags! I sign; you gimme your check. I take a light pack—and—"

Larry Levoy blew a light kiss to the river from the uncalloused palm of his slender hand. The two men returned to camp.

Whitaker watched them—the English mining engineer, big, easy-going, hearty, quiet, standing with Levoy, who was telling him something—watched the amiable face undergo its changes of expression as Levoy's narrative proceeded. Finally—Whitaker's mouth hardened at the sight—Fawncrest's hand shot out in congratulation. And his voice rose as he said:

"Sorry to lose you, old man. But of course it's the only thing to do—your people burned out; that sort of thing. And the sale?—well, fifty thousand is fifty thousand. We'll get you off in a jiffy!"

The three entered the tent-shack where, on a box top, the deed was made out transferring Levoy's half interest in all the claims staked by himself and by Fawncrest to Robert Whitaker. Levoy signed it, and it was duly witnessed not only by Fawncrest but—this at Whitaker's insistence—by "Ticktock, his mark," the same being the usual cross, and the explanation preceding the signing sounding about the same in the ears of the native as the sounds of the clock after which he had been named. Yet Ticktock, as only Whitaker knew, was the one really important person in the antecedents of the affair!

Then Bob Whitaker got out the check book Levoy had given him, and made out and signed a check for fifty thousand dollars on a bank he had never heard of. This he gravely handed over to Levoy, who, as gravely, turned over to him the deed, in the fold of which the gambler had deftly inserted the check. Levoy had previously handed over to Whitaker a poke which contained, he said, "about twenty-five hundred dollars."

Whitaker had scarcely bothered to "heft" it!

While the English engineer had played scrivener, the slim, pale miner had packed his few light belongings and some food and tucked them neatly into a pack-sack. This he now carefully adjusted to his back, expressed the hope that the dam would hold until his two friends had cleaned up "quite a bit more gold," and held out his hand to Whitaker.

"Good-by, Bob," he said simply.

But the newcomer slowly shook his head.

Lawrence Levoy threw back his own and laughed—sardonically, yet happily—heartily! Whereat Whitaker flushed—yet not unhappily. And when the departing man reached out the refused hand to the pardner he was leaving, and the Englishman, perplexed, was about to take it, Whitaker suddenly struck down Levoy's hand with a smart wrap of his fist and told Fawncrest not to soil himself by the contact.

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"LEVOY," said the man from Nome, "I'd have let you go to get your punishment later—the worst of it. But that laugh you gave me—that's too —— much! You'll stay and take the first of —— 'lmighty's retribution right here!"

"My deah fellow!" exclaimed the amazed Fawncrest, while the other paled in rage. "This is most extraordinary!"

"All right, make a holler, you —— fool!" said Levoy in a quiet voice. "I got your receipt in full for all claims and demands. And anything you say about the deal goes double—remember that. You and me both!"

"Oh, I don't think Fawncrest here will prosecute us—either of us. But I'm comin' clean, Larry. You can call me a liar if you choose!"

"But what's it all about, men?" cried the bewildered Fawncrest, his florid, handsome face suffused by embarrassment. He had the Briton's dislike of a "scene."

"I'll tell you," replied Whitaker, seating himself on the edge of the bunk. He lit a stubby, blackened pipe. "This man Levoy, whom I only knew slightly before I traveled overland with him from the Koyukuk to Nome last Spring—"

"But he didn't know you!"

"He *pretended* not to know me. You'll see why in a moment. This man is an ex-gambler, card-sharp—"

"No!"

"And swindler!"

"But that's impossible!"

"And this is the worst, accordin' to us Alaskans—he ate and slep' with me on a long trail that wasn't hardly a trail at all, takin' my help and my favors in many a tight squeeze—and then robs me. That makes him plain skunk!"

Larry Levoy's eyelashes flickered. His hand would have crept to his thigh, but he noticed that Whitaker had beaten him to it. Whitaker's hand was already resting lightly on his right hip. There must be a bulging pocket near! Levoy said nothing.

"Can you make good on that?" asked Fawncrest politely. The Englishman's eye was hard. He felt exceedingly grateful to the man who had led him to the "bonanza!"

"I'll leave that to you, pardner, when I'm done, whether I've proved it or not. I want to tell you about that trip. We come from not far from Bettles, way up in the Koyukuk country. I was there four years on some half-worked-out ground, cleaning it up. I worked about fourteen hours a day, runnin' a race with a mortgage on my farm in Missouri. The mortgage was workin' twenty-fo' hours a day to my fourteen, but, thank God, 'twasn't working quite so hard. I got about eleven thousand dollars for my share—there was three of us. And I started overland for Nome. I had a great big poke holding ten thousand and a little poke which I mostly carried in my pocket with about a thousand in nuggets and coarse dust. It was a thousand before I bought one of just four hosses there was in that country. He was the best—and fit for the boneyard at that!

"A little ways out, mebbe fo' days, I met this man—callin' him a *man!* He was footin' it. Why, I don't know. He might have gone down river. But mebbe he was in a hurry, like I was, and the Yukon not open yet, to get to salt water. My hurry was legitimut. I doubt if his was, from what I know of him now! Well, anyhow, I took him on, chuckin' his pack up on top of my bag o' bones, apologizin' to the old hoss when I did it.

"This feller helped in places—best he could, I reckon. Had to, or leave his bones with mine and the hoss's in the timber over there or down here in the tundra country.

"The worst was when the snow got melted right and the rivers roarin'. Getting that cayuse over those streams was a caution! Say, this here river was nothin'! What happened here, though, was the toughest thing, next to drownin' us, that could 'a' possibly happened to me. I lost my ten thousand dollars!"

"Dear me," said Fawncrest sympathetically. "How was that?"

"We crossed this way: I went on ahead wadin' or swimmin' and found a good place on the other bank to get the hoss up. That's the way we always did. You see you just have to have a shaller bar, or a low bank, or shaller water on the other side. On the nigh side you can shove the brute in, if you have to plop him in by main strength. But on 'tother side, if he can't scramble out, the current will take him and you can't hold him. So I always explored out across in advance. That's what we done here. The saddle was put on first,

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and then the pack, such as it was, and then the big poke. I always seen to it it was fastened tight, fore and aft. But the string of the poke, tying the neck tight—this must have gragerly loosened. Anyhow that's what we thought must 'a' happened. Then! I don't now! I think this skunk loosened it a'purpose when I was on this side and before he threw me the rope and pushed the old hoss in!

"There I was on this side, pullin' on the rope and Levoy wadin' in back of the hoss to keep him goin' till he got out fur enough to want to keep comin' 'stead of going back. And suddenly I seen the poke leakin'—just slowly vomitin' gold all the way from bank to bank. I hollered at Levoy, back of the horse. But the water was roarin', and he didn't hear. And couldn't 'a' done much, anyhow, I reckon. I pulled like ——. Man, I sweated, hopin' to get that old cayuse over before the poke was limp. Say, pardner, she was just a wilted rag tied to the saddle when I grabbed her. Just a few stragglin' colors left. She'd emptied almost slick and clean. Levoy, did you loosen that poke string before you shoved that horse in the water?"

"Certainly not!" denied the man, coldly.

"You lie, I guess. You framed it in that low, cunnin' brain o' yours between rivers, I'll bet. Let it go. That's what happened, Mr. Fawncrest. We dried out in this here shack, and I rolled the poke up—it was a big, valuable poke. I didn't say much, but I sure felt like jumpin' in the river and callin' it a life-time! Would of, mebbe, only that wouldn't help my folks none!"

Fawncrest slowly "got" it.

"You mean to tell me that when this man came to me in Nome and told me about the wonderful 'prospect' he had found in a river out here, miles and miles from Nome, that that was what he meant? Salted? Salted with about ten thousand dollars of your dust?"

"Correct. That was what he meant."

Fawncrest, his face that of a lobster, following the best Insular traditions, was slow to get it all—slow and sure.

"You dragged the horse across right opposite this shack?"

Whitaker replied very carefully.

"Yes, this same shack!"

"And the cross-cut we've made is in the river, right opposite—in fact exactly opposite. I remember this fine fellow said: 'Might as well work close to home. Let's try her here—right here where I found the prospect.'"

He turned promptly upon Levoy:

"Do you fight, my man? Take off that pack thing. I'm going to thrash you properly!"

Mr. Lawrence Levoy had affected and preserved through the narrative a manner of sneering indifference, as though he looked upon Whitaker as a blurting fool who little realized what a mess he was getting himself into by this virtual confession. But when Fawncrest made this unexpected demand upon him—unexpected, quite, from a man burly enough but awkward, clumsy, soft, apparently, in spite of some little shovel work, while he himself was quick and fit, Levoy made as if to divest himself of the pack; but, his right arm seeming to wriggle out of the strap, really sought his hip pocket, and he whipped out a gun.

HE WAS not quick enough for Whitaker, however, who was taking no chance on the temper of the gambler. Whitaker, too, had his gun out. But it was not needed, for the Englishman, displaying an incredible agility, knocked the pistol from Levoy's hand and struck the man himself to the floor of the little cabin. Pale with rage, no longer poker-faced, but with murder in his eyes, the salter struggled out of his straps and arose, making a quick grab for the gun as he sprang from the floor. Again the Englishman was too quick for him and dealt him a stunning blow on his ear.

"Let's get out of this messy place," he suggested, dodging an upper-cut and swinging a heavy fist to the gambler's jaw. "I propose to show you, my man, that my company is not to be trifled with in this way. You seem to be a contemptible thief. Out of this, I say—"

And the engineer urged his point by a succession of stunning buffets that forced Levoy to the doorway. The gambler flailed the air in this short, quick journey.

Whitaker interposed, thrusting his body quickly between the two men.

"Hol' on, Fawncrest!" he exclaimed crisply. "Wait a minute. I ain't finished."

"Wait for what?" demanded the irate

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man, ready seemingly, to punish them both.

"You —— fool!" broke out the gambler in this brief respite. "What do you think you gain by this—givin' yourself away, too. You wait!"

"*You* wait!" corrected Whitaker with quick, sardonic laughter. "Sit down, sit down, I tell you, Fawncrest. Le' me handle 'im!"

"Out with it, then. I'm far from through!" The engineer's resentment seemed to gain headway.

Levoy, pressing his hand to his bleeding ear, broke in fiercely:

"You let me handle him!" he exclaimed to his late partner of the cross-cut. "Look at him. He's taken back some of the money and declared he's satisfied. And he framed this fake deal we've made. Check for fifty thousand! I gave him the blank check, myself. He suggested the deed of my interest. That was so I could skip, and he'd have a right to stay and get out the rest, if he could—if the water didn't—"

"What 'rest?' What do you mean by rest, my man? We've taken out within a hundred or two of ten thousand dollars by working back and forth, widening the cut down-stream. Whitaker, didn't you say the poke contained just ten thousand dollars?"

"I certainly did," reiterated the man from Nome. "And it's just because you lied to me, Larry Levoy—tried to double-cross me again, and worse, that I made this 'deal' with you. Keep cool, Fawncrest. Light up, and I'll explain this little mining claim transfer to you. This light-fingered gent will appreciate it too!"

"I sure will!" agreed Levoy sarcastically. He felt that after this outburst of folly, Whitaker would have to stand by him in their common defense. They were in a wilderness, and two against one.

"When we got to Nome all I could do was to get some reg'lar money for steamboat and train fare by sellin' some of my nuggets and coarse dust, and trust to my wits and my pretty good repitation back at home for the rest. I told this swindler I was comin' back when I could, and get that money out in low water. That give him the idea, I suppose. He said 'twas no use, couldn't be done. Better forget about it. And I says, 'I know better. You forget about it, Larry. Don't tell anybody. They might go out there prospectin'!' And he promised. And seen me off on the boat—carried a grip for me, the skunk. And all the while his crooked brain busy, I reckon.

"That was June. I got outside in a couple of weeks, and that durn bank sure had me sweatin' to convince 'em I had the money up here—more'n enough for 'em—but had to go back and get it. They sabbe a minin' proposition like a pig does po'try. Couldn't see, if I had it, why I didn't bring it—why I didn't kick the gold out of that there river with my boots! I got a respite, Fawncrest. They give me time till the last boats leave and I can get home with the money. The last boat's goin' to go in a few weeks now. I spent pretty near the last of my little poke gettin' back in again, leaving my wife and the boy and girl hopeful, with the roof good over their heads till November. I come out here hopin' the river would be near dry, and I could get a few natives to he'p me get the gold."

"But why the stealth?" questioned the still-suspicious engineer. "When you approached and this man denied knowing you, why not tell me the truth instead of taking him off on pretense of looking at the dam and framing—do you call it?—this elaborate scheme of taking over from him perfectly worthless mining property and giving him a fictitious check? Answer me that, Whitaker, will you?"

"Sure!" was the ingenuous reply. "Simple enough. When I approached here yesterday—"

"Yesterday!"

"Yes. In the afternoon. I saw men working here. I thought I was double-crossed, right away. Unless it was just chance, or something. So I got out of sight and after dark, in the rain I came up here and stood outside this tent and heard the voice of Larry Levoy, and your talk. And I knew he was robbin' me. And I knew he was robbin' you—out of your time, anyhow, and your help. And I heard him say you'd taken out the whole ten thousand. I knew right then why he was fussin' about the rain and the dam. He wanted the rain, wanted the dam to bust so's to flood you out, so's you'd have to quit for the winter before you knew there was nothing more and that all you had got out was pure salt! He pretended to go on up to watch the dam and strengthen it, but what he really did was to cut a couple of notches in

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it, exposing soft dirt so when the water rose a little more the dam would start washin' and it would all go!"

"Well, I'm transfixed!" uttered Fawncrest profanely.

"So I was wise when I returned next morning. I knew he'd played you for a sucker, but I wanted to find out what his real intentions was toward me. So I got him off—I knew he'd come when I talked dam to him—and felt him out."

He turned to Levoy, his small eyes narrowing in anger and contempt.

"I might have took your word that you was goin' to hold out a big chunk of this gold for me, if I should come back or you could find me. It wouldn't have been so bad, if you really thought I'd never be back, and it was anybody's gold if he could mine it out. And I figgered, if you was middlin' square with me, to go to this man you bunked and try to fix it for you—tell him all you meant was to lure him up here and make him put up cash and flour for these natives to help get out the ten thousand and then pay him back with somethin' added for his time and trouble. But you cut your throat, —— you, when you told me you had out only five thousand dollars, when I heard you with my own ears the night before say 'ten!' Oh, I know why you did it. You knew if you said ten I'd holler for most of it and let you scrap it out with Fawncrest here, and take your medicine from him—the penitentiary, I suppose. By lettin' me think there was a lot of it here still, you knew I'd stay on and try to get it out of the river and you could slip away. So I traps you by this here 'deal' to buy you out."

LEVOY snorted derisively. "A lot o' good that did you!"

"Oh, I don't know," answered Whitaker reflectively. "Wait!"

"As nearly as I can see," put in Fawncrest judicially, "the man is right. Instead of blowing on him to me and enlisting my help to make him give up the rest of the gold that was rightfully yours, you were content with the little he gave you. How much was it?"

"A lousy twenty-five hundred," answered Whitaker, "when he knew that that mortgage alone was over six—"

"You seemed content with that and connived at his escape, when you had nothing to gain, knowing already that all the gold had been taken out—"

Whitaker interrupted with a raised hand.

"'Wait,' I said! I would have let him go, yes—only he gave me that long snort of a horse-laugh. That made me keep him—to hear the rest of it.

"When he took the lantern and went up toward the dam—I don't know what made me do it—mebbe the cottonwood there on the bank didn't look quite big enough, though I hardly knew I was thinking of that. Anyhow I walked over to it to feel the blaze-mark on it I had put there with my jack-knife, while Levoy was startin' a fire in the stove in here after we pulled the hoss over and I got through cussin' my bad luck! The blaze wasn't there! It was a "W." There wasn't no four lines. There wasn't one. I lit a match and she was blank—bark smooth. Say, I sure was flabbergasted!

"I hot-footed it to the igloos and found the man that owned this tent-shack, this fellow Ticktock. And I powwowed with him. 'Fix 'em tree?' I asked him. You see I just couldn't get it. 'No fix 'em tree,' he told me when I explained to him about the knife cuts. 'Fix 'em tent. Mink not so good up ribber. Me move tent down.' Get me? I got him. And this morning I went up river. And there, sure, enough, a half mile up I found the place where the tent had been before, when we pulled the horse out of the river. And there on the bank, the nearest cottonwood was a bigger one. And my 'W' blaze-mark was there! There's where my ten thousand dollars in Koyukuk dust is. You could cross-cut there and take it out, if the river isn't too high. Look! Here's what's left of the coarse gold from the Koyukuk. And here's the gold you've been taking out here!"

And Whitaker whipped out the very small, nearly empty poke and the large one with the twenty-five hundred in it and poured samples on the table before them.

Fawncrest glanced at them interestedly, his face drawn to an exclamation point. And Lawrence Levoy stared at them, his face white.

"Don't look much alike, do they? This gold down here, this real river gold—there must be hundreds of thousands of it—a million or two, mebbe in this long river—is brighter than my Koyukuk gold. Look what you've done to yourself, Larry Levoy,

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by holding out five thousand dollars on me, and leaving me still practically broke, unable to lift my mortgage. You low cur-dog!"

"Good gracious, man!" whistled the mining engineer, his eyes gleaming with something approaching a real excitement.

"So that's why you framed the purchase from him—got a deed from him?"

"Sure," nodded Whitaker coolly. "I wanted the mining claims. I seemed to play in with him—to help him escape in order to stay here and get out the rest of my dust. That was the only way to get a deed from him without letting him suspect that I really wanted this mining ground for what was in it—a fortune big enough for twenty men!"

"And you done me," shrieked Levoy. 'me that found it?"

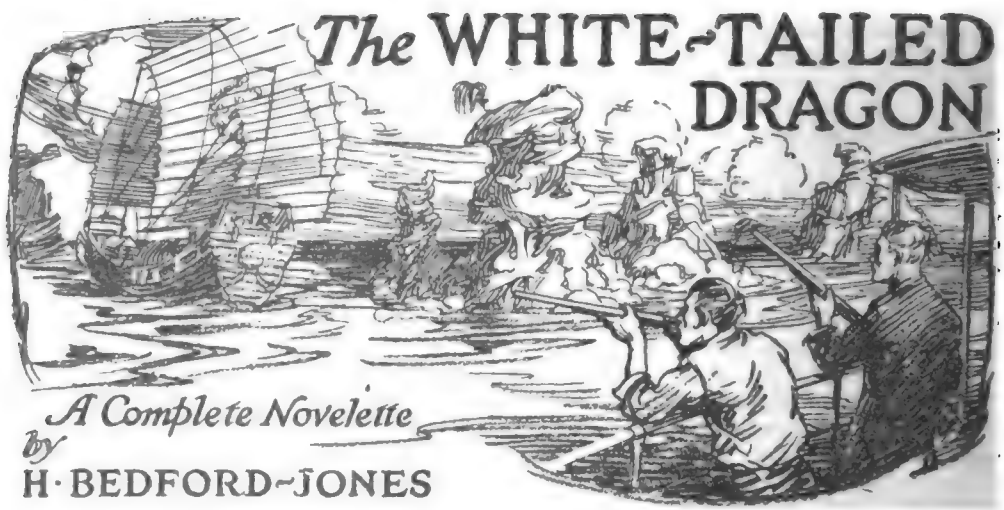
Whitaker laughed long and loudly. It was the last laugh—that is said to be the best.

"Yes, you found it by accident. And didn't know you'd found it. All that was in your heart was crookedness and more crookedness—and more! You couldn't quit! But you can keep the seventy-five hundred. You'll gamble it away, I suppose. And you'll have the rest of your life to think about what you've lost!"

He turned to Fawncrest.

"Pardner—you and I are pardners from now on, I suppose—you and your syndicate. The reason I didn't want you to maul him too bad was that black eyes and sore bones wouldn't leave him punished like he deserved. He's got his now. For the rest of his life.

"Take up your pack and beat it, Larry. So long!"



The WHITE-TAILED DRAGON

A Complete Novelette

by

H·BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "South, West and North," "Brown Kurneval," etc.

JERRY CRAVEN was astonished, to put it mildly. The man coming toward him was beyond question an American, and to meet an American, here in Port Courbet was extraordinary. Jerry thought he was the only American to have seen the place in years, or for years to come. Yet here was a brisk, smooth-shaven, elderly man with American clothes and an American air.

"Hello, there! You Jerry Craven?" exclaimed the other genially. "Couldn't mistake you among those French whiskers. Hennessy is my name—not Three-Star, but Charles."

"I'm Craven. Glad to meet you," said that young man, with the lazy air which caused so many people to mistake his abilities. "Tourist?" he asked, with a sardonic smile.

Hennessy gave him a sharp look, and it startled Craven. Here was a man well-dressed, yet inconspicuous; his face strong and well-balanced, with no particular twist of feature to hold in memory; yet that glance from the bright brown eyes brought him up

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all standing, so to speak. He remembered a tiger he had seen in a cage at Hainan, the other day—those long, sleepy, yellow-brown eyes, and their swift instantaneous wakening into deadly menace.

"Look here," said Hennessy, with a certain genial frankness, "I don't want to be impertinent, Craven. Heard you were here and would like to talk over the table. Can we get a drink?"

"Hm! We can if you have the price," said Jerry Craven.

Hennessy blinked at him.

"The price? Are you in earnest? I don't like jokes."

"Me neither, when they're on me. I'm earnest as all get-out."

Hennessy looked rather bewildered. He took out a silk handkerchief and mopped his cheeks, and stared hard at Craven.

"I understood you were the owner of that trim little craft there at the coal wharf."

"I am," said Craven lazily. "Is any explanation of my broke condition due you?"

"It is if I want to talk charter."

"Right. Come along and buy that drink."

They started for the café near the post office.

Port Courbet, nestled in among the mountains and islands of the Gulf of Tonkin, was not patterned on Saigon or Paris. The chief points of view consisted of the three coal wharves with their traveling cranes, the ship workshops, the fort on the west point, and the two mooring buoys at the main anchorage.

"Heard at Haiphong you were here," said Hennessy, when they were settled over a *quinquina*, "and came over to see you."

"Price is going up," returned Craven whimsically. "Here's how."

"Right. Now to learn why the owner of a crack little hundred-ton yacht is broke."

"Bent back and forth and broke square in the middle," said Craven with a cheerful air. "I'm like the chap who carried a big diamond for a front—I've got that yacht. Threw up my salesman's job in Canton, when I made some money a couple of months ago—made it in a hurry by helping a *comprador* put over a deal. Heard about that yacht, built for a rich chink who was smashed by the political troubles, and bought her at auction for two thousand. She's worth ten. I was bringing her down to sell at Saigon, where I heard she'd fetch top price, and had to put in here for coal, Then my troubles started."

Hennessy grunted.

"You're not a seaman?"

"Not much of a one, though I got an ensign's job as a boy, at the end of the war, and went on to get a first officer's papers. Well, I got into a row two days ago. My skipper cleared out on the Haiphong boat the other night, and the crew cleared out too——we all had a row. They wanted to smuggle, and I didn't. Then I had a row with the authorities here on account of losing my temper and punching a customs guard. They soaked me a thousand francs for that, yesterday. Having to pay off my men ahead of time was a jolt. Then we were clear out of coal, which made us put in here—they euchred me at Canton and only half-filled the bunkers, and here I paid in advance. This watering business, having to get chinks to bring good water from up the river was another item. Not to mention port and pilotage fees—wow! They soaked me plenty, that's all. Now I've got the yacht, but how the —— I'm going to get a crew, not to mention making Saigon, is more than I can see. If you want to charter her, shoot! I'm open."

It was peculiar of Hennessy in that he seldom or never smiled, yet could be genial enough. Now a trace of mastery shot athwart his genial humor. One discerned suddenly that the man had unguessed depth.

"You'll do," he said quietly. "Craven, I like you, but your hint about smuggling makes me want to know where you stand. If I charter that craft of yours for two weeks' work in the bay outside, among the islands, it'll clear up your troubles. I'll charter you clear down to Saigon, for that matter. But if you're one of these gun-shy birds who balk at seeing a John's pigtail yanked and want to sing missionary hymns with the deck hands, why, I'd better know it."

Craven found those brown eyes biting into him again, hard and clear and hot.

"Hm!" he said. "You're a queer one and no mistake! As for smuggling, I'll do that if I want, but nobody else aboard will do it unless they let me in on it, see? Now, I'm not exactly gun-shy, Hennessy, but there are things I stick at. Not from principle, mind. I'm not one of your high-principled boys who'll go to heaven happy

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and be sure about going there—nix! I'm ready to lie, fight, steal or burn, if the job happens to appeal to me. Get me? It's up to you to make the job appeal, Hennessy."

The other man eyed him steadily for a moment. Those words were not to be taken at full face value, as he knew well enough; but when Craven said that the job must appeal, he meant just that.

"Are you considering any other offers?" asked Hennessy slowly. Craven laughed.

"Wher'd they come from? No, I'm not."

"What's your price for a charter—two weeks here at most, and the run to Saigon?"

Craven considered, named a sum. Hennessy shook his head, with a grim mirthless smile.

"No, you don't. I'll lift it three thousand, if the job appeals. I want you to be fully satisfied. Suit?"

"Shoot," countered Craven, frowning a little. "I'm not to be bribed."

"I'm not sure, said Hennessy slowly, "whether I most admire you or would most like to take you on with my fists!"

"That goes double, barring the grammar," said Craven promptly.

The two men looked at each other, and their lips twitched. They understood.

"Come out with it. If I say no, then I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Right."

Hennessy sat back in his chair, produced cigarets, lighted one, and Craven took one and lighted it at the same match. Then occurred an odd incident, to which Craven could not find any clue. He himself spoke a little Cantonese, as much as one learns after two years in foreign settlement circles, and he knew the difficulty of mastering the language.

A coolie was passing, a man bent under a load of rattans. He came to a sudden stop, staring at Hennessy wide-eyed, his mouth falling open. Here was utter blind amazement and recognition. He was an old man, with a wispy gray mustache. He spoke two words, and Hennessy stiffened in his chair. The brown eyes became shot with yellow lightnings.

Hennessy snapped out a torrent of Chinese—apparently all abuse—handling the language with an easy fluency which stupefied Craven. The coolie nodded, as though catching some hidden message, and then went away, shuffling under his load. Hennessy uttered a low oath, as he met the gaze of Craven.

"Recognized me—what a stroke of chance!" he said, a little wonder in his voice. "And yet I was afraid some of them —"

He checked himself, took a pull at his cigaret, spoke with a complete change of manner

"You don't know the bay outside?"

"From the charts and what I saw coming in."

Little as that was, it was yet a great deal, for the Bay of Halong, or more properly the Fai Tsi Long archipelago, which stretches along the Tonkin coast from Haiphong to the Chinese frontier, is one of the wonder-spots of the western Asian coast. Here are a mass of islands, a maze of the most grotesque rock formations conceivable, few or none inhabited save by monkeys, threaded by a few channels, well enough charted and yet seldom visited. These fantastic islets emerge from the water in abrupt pinnacles, towering for hundreds of feet, some in naked rock, some green with trees. Around them the water is like a pond, for wind seldom reaches here, and one may find grottos, caverns, queerly shaped formations on every hand, known only to birds and occasional fishermen.

Indeed, with the exception of the portion nearest Haiphong, much visited by tourist parties, the archipelago is seldom seen except by chance visitors, Its mazes are threaded by several deep-water channels leading to the only secure anchorages on the entire Tonkin coast, so it happens that many a ship comes in here to ride out a typhoon. Not every ship coming in, however, goes out again.

Only since France has been able to spare men and guns and ingenuity from her titanic western struggle, has she managed to make this portion of her dominions safe. From time immemorial, these scattered islets have been pirate nests, where all pursuit could be laughed at. When Tonkin became too dangerous a hunting ground, there was all the Chinese coast near at hand, all rich Yunnan to be plundered. And Yunnan was plundered. Halong Bay became a second Madagascar, a safe haven for all pirates. Those fantastic rocks towering against the sky from whose clear-cut outlines sprang the line-motives of Chinese painters, had witnessed many a scene of

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blood and callous cruelty in no distant day. As for knowing the whole bay, nobody could boast of this, unless it might be some stray fishermen. No wonder a sharp little smile touched the lips of Hennessy, when he asked whether his companion knew that bay.

"I SUPPOSE we'll have to talk turkey," he resumed. "Suppose I told you I wanted to recover a treasure of half a million dollars, specie? Would that hurt your conscience?"

"I guess not," said Craven, his brows going up in surprize. "Salvage?"

That sardonic smile again touched the lips of Hennessy.

"Salvage, yes. If you've been connected with banking circles out here, you'll have heard about the Banque d'Indo Chine shipment lost in 1914, year the war broke out."

Craven whistled. Had he heard about it, indeed! That shipment of a hundred thousand gold Napoleons, completely vanished with the ship carrying it, was famous in the annals of the coast. Nowadays, with each of those Napoleons risen in value to eighty francs, the sum was staggering; in dollar computation, it was a cool half million. The loss of that ship and what she held, in a sudden typhoon, had nearly wrecked every one from underwriters to colonial government.

"So you know where it is, do you?" he asked with a curious glance.

Hennessy nodded slightly.

"Yes. Cards on the table! I know where it is, and no other man alive knows. I want to go pick it up. You're straight. I'll gamble on trusting you, with a bonus if we make Saigon safely. The job will take a week, or a trifle over. Now say yes or no."

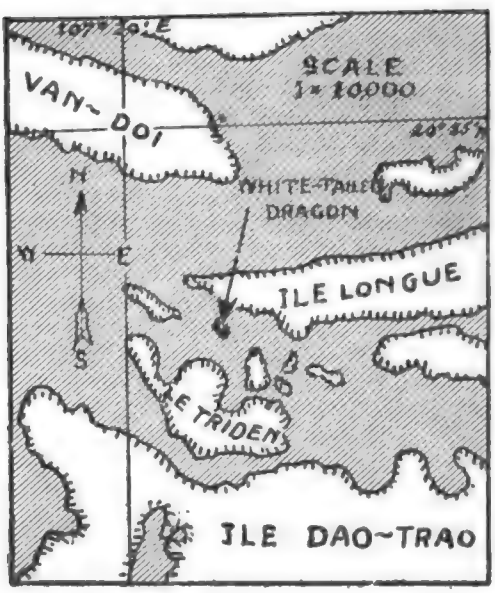
"One question. Why are you set on having me?"

"I'm not; I'm set on having your boat." Hennessy's lips curved slightly. "I heard some of your recent crew talking yesterday, in Haiphong. They were not complimentary to you, personally. I gather you are abrupt in your methods. But your craft is exactly what I want—fast, of little draught, yet able to stand a rough seaway. She may have to run, too, I tell you! Satisfied?"

Jerry Craven nodded, drummed with his fingers on the table-top, reflected.

Something wrong here, some screw loose—it came to him not from the story, but from the flashes he had into Hennessy's substrata. He sensed under this man's genial surface queer things, perhaps repellent things. At least, Hennessy was no weakling. This thought, recurring to him in after days, invariably brought amusement.

If he did not like Hennessy, that was no reason to refuse the charter. Nor did he exactly dislike the man. On better acquaintance Hennessy might well be a stout friend. Craven could not refuse anything



that would save his neck, and in this offer was nothing crooked. Behind it—well, behind it was another question entirely! There was no telling what lay behind it. Hennessy might think he knew a lot, and might really know nothing. Plenty of people in the world like that, trying to pick up easy money and getting stung for their pains. As to the ownership of the gold, salvaged or not, there was a question not worth going into. Only the courts could settle it—and frankly, Craven did not care a hang who owned the gold.

He blurted it out. "Fat lot it'd matter, ten years lost! I'd like a chance to get my fingers on it, that's all."

The brown eyes flashed and then Hennessy laughed. Craven did not like the laugh.

"You'll have the chance, if you accept. As though you'd go mad over it! Nonsense. You're well balanced. Wouldn't cut my throat for it, eh?"

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"I might," said Craven, half seriously.

Hennessy shook his head.

"Nope. I know men. You're no throat-cutter, no—well, let it pass. Take me up or not?"

"It's agreed. We can't make out any charter party in this port, no consul this side of Haiphong. Suppose you turn a couple of thousand dollars gold into francs and hand it over as an advance; we'll write out a simple agreement and sign it. That'd hold, I think."

"Right. I've got bankers' checks," said Hennessy, frowning. "Just out from home. Probably the mine offices will cash them—they run the town. I've a few thousand francs, too. Now, what about a crew?"

"Besides the cook, I've just one man left," said Craven. "He's my Chinese helmsman—quartermaster—a Hongkong Britisher and a splendid chap. I'll need an engineer and assistant, and eight others. Chinks, I suppose."

"I'll be engineer—I know engines," said Hennessy.

"Marine?" Craven was skeptical.

"I've got a chief's ticket, fifteen years old—if that'll suit you."

"Fine! And you speak Chinese. You're a man of surprizes. Let's have another drink, then go chase up a crew."

"Right for the drink," and Hennessy rapped on the table. "I'll get the crew."

"Agreed. When do you want to start?"

"The minute your coal's aboard."

"Say the morning, then. I'll get clearance papers for Saigon. We couldn't get out these accursed channels by night."

Hennessy's lips twitched at this, and Craven wondered.

II

SIX hours from Haiphong, this Port Courbet was at the nether edge of things, between the new civilization on the one side, and the ancient unorganized civilization on the other. The only reason for the place lay in its coal mines—reason enough why sixty whites should be settled here, and a town and wharves and a tram-line to the mines. Outside the club, their influence did not go far. Leave the town, and you were in ancient China. Just so with the bay. In the deep-water channels were steamers, coal barges, what-not. A step away, among the scattered islets, were the same unwieldy craft to which the old Portuguese navigators gave the name of "junks" from their sails of woven rattan or *junso*.

Several of these junks, as well as numberless sampans and lighters, were in the harbor near the *General*, as Craven had rechristened his purchase. The full title of the yacht was *Fuk Po Tseung Kwan Shin*, or *Spirit of the Wave-quelling General*, a title no doubt resounding in Cantonese ears, but quite hopeless from Craven's point of view. On the evening of his meeting with Hennessy, who was now installed in the cabin below, the two men sat under the after-deck awning and watched the moonlit scene around them, over cheroots and coffee.

"The men will be aboard at sunrise, and we'll be off with the tide," announced Hennessy. "Sweet engines you have down there, Craven! She'll do, this craft. I might buy her myself. By the way, I'll get out my charts in the morning. You'll need 'em."

"I have charts of the whole bay," said Craven. "It's well mapped."

Hennessy chuckled.

"You haven't got my charts—nobody has! Compare them with the French charts, and you might be surprized. They're a bit old, but no matter. One good thing about this bay, it doesn't change about. Queer, those junks! Know anything about 'em?"

"Little," returned Craven, wondering how the man happened to have private charts of this district. "Why?"

"It's a study. That big chap over yonder, looking like a mass of timber ready to fall apart—see her? She's almost the exact model of a Levantine zebec, eighteenth century style. She's a thirty-tonner. The heraldic ship of the *City of Paris* is twin sister to that junk by the coal wharf. See the lighter near the mooring buoys? An old converted war junk. Barring the high poop, her lines are identical with those of a seventeenth century Spanish ship. You can find European parallels, mostly a couple of hundred years old, for all the different styles of junks."

"Apparently," said Craven dryly, "you've been in these waters before."

"I have," returned the other, without further comment.

Craven pondered. He recalled the old coolie's recognition of Hennessy, and what had just been said about charts. And

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while he was thinking of these things, something very singular occurred as if on purpose to feed his speculation.

The after-deck was shaded from the moonlight, though their white figures were distinct enough. In the high stern of a junk near-by climbed a native and stood as though gazing at them. He uttered a long and sonorous call. To Craven, this Tonkinese dialect was entirely at variance with the Cantonese he knew, and he frowned over the little he could pick up.

An oath burst from Hennessy, who straightened in his chair and snapped out something in response to the call—some sort of a negative, heavily emphasized. The native disappeared from sight.

"Something about a dragon, wasn't it?" asked Craven in a casual tone. "White-tailed dragon, it seemed to me—as if there were such a thing! Isn't that what *bacht lung* means? I think the words are on the chart somewhere."

Hennessy was silent for a long moment as though reaching a decision.

"Used to be a temple and cave of that name, up the bay." he said grudgingly. "It was headquarters for quite a pirate gang, back in the old days, but the French broke them up and smallpox cleaned most of 'em out, and the place was lost—buried or blown up."

Craven said nothing, but smoked in silence. Hennessy read this silence, as one so often does. He felt the cause of it, the thoughts working behind it. He spoke again, abruptly:

"You're wondering. You saw that chap recognize me yesterday; you know this call was directed at me just now. Well, I was up this way a good many years ago. Things were different then. How confounded quick these beggars are to catch on to things! I'll bet it's all over the place already that I'm back."

He spoke musingly. Craven considered he must have been a well-known person during his earlier stay in these waters. Then Hennessy rose and yawned.

"Well, I'll turn in—must be up and about early, eh? Good night."

"Good night," returned Craven, and after a little followed the other man below. He determined to let the mystery go. No use bothering his head about it. Whatever this white-tailed dragon affair might mean, it was none of his business. And this charter had saved him from complete financial disaster.

With morning they got under way. Craven, as acting master, was fully competent despite his disparagement of his own abilities, and his quartermaster was a treasure. This man, by name John Lee, spoke perfect English, had served in the navy, and had been to France in war days. He was a short, stocky man, very swarthy and stolid, with sharp glittering eyes, and he seldom spoke unless he had something to say. Beneath his dungarees he possessed tremendous physique, his strength of arms and shoulders being abnormal.

"Everything like a watch below," said Hennessy, appearing on the bridge. "Good men, those I picked up! Going right out the Henriette channel? Good! Call me when you sight Le Bouquet."

"You're going out to sea?" asked Craven in some surprize.

"Best way," said Hennessy. "Have to cover two lines of a triangle, coming back by the Casque pass. You'll see. All day ahead of us! I'll duck below and keep my eye on things and if you need any pilotage, give me a ring. Mind you keep a quarter-cable off the buoys!"

He disappeared.

The yacht was heading out by the Hamelin pass which ran into the main Hasse Henriette farther on. All around, the horizon was closed in by a solid mass of rock, shooting out of the water at all angles and in grotesque shapes. Craven pored over the chart and directed John Lee who was at the steering gear.

The channel was fairly directed, yet care was necessary as the *General* threaded her way along the sharp rocks towering hundreds of feet into the air on every side. A glance at the smaller-scale chart showed Craven the scheme of Hennessy. To avoid cutting directly across the Fai Tsi Long bay, shallow and treacherous, it was necessary to run straight out to sea, then turn and come up by the Casque pass on another angle. Though where Hennessy could be heading for in this direction was a mystery.

"Good men," said John Lee, his eyes glittering momentarily on the men washing decks forward. "Good men, Cap'n. Not young men, though. Very good men."

Why the insistence, the note of musing astonishment? Craven's attention was caught.

"Is it surprizing they should be good

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men?" he asked amused. "True, they don't seem young, any of them—what the —— are you driving at, John?"

"I don't know, sir. I think they are men who have worked together a long time."

John Lee vouchsafed no more and Craven shrugged the matter away, having other things to think about.

The yacht was presently over the flats and amid the labyrinth of islands beyond—the Toque, Rhino, Sugar-loaf, and others innumerable, until at length she drew into the main Henriette pass. The fairway had not been deserted, all this while. There was no lack of fishing craft, several junks were heading in or out, and a coal barge was coming in empty to Port Courbet.

The morning was half gone, and ahead showed the Dragon and the Ladder, with the other grotesque formations of the pass closing in the horizon on all sides, when John Lee again offered a comment; Craven had just commanded full speed ahead, all danger being now past.

"Full speed, sir," said John Lee, and signaled. "And now, perhaps, we shall pass her."

"Pass what?" asked Craven.

"The black junk with two masts, sir."

Craven stood beside the man and gazed frowningly ahead. A quarter-mile beyond them was a small two-masted junk of some fifteen tons, with two enormous fan-shaped lateen sails.

"She makes speed," said John Lee. "She was ahead of us when we started, and keeps the same distance, sir. Now watch—"

The junk was tacking, and passed across the channel. Craven perceived her to have tremendous and unguessed speed. She slipped through the water like a snake. With his glasses Craven examined her decks closely. He could see only two or three figures forward, two more on the high, wide poop.

"Nothing unusual about her," he observed, "except her speed. And now we're picking up fast on her."

The black junk abruptly slid out of sight behind a jutting pinnacle of rock. Craven watched for her reappearance, as the yacht leaped ahead down the open channel, but she did not come back into sight. He grew interested. When they passed the rocky islet, he searched for her. She had disappeared. John Lee laughed a little.

"In among these islands, who could find her? There is something tricky going on, sir."

"Nonsense," said Craven. "She's nothing to do with us."

The other did not respond. Craven perceived there were dark thoughts in this yellow man's head. What to make of it he could not tell, so he dismissed the whole thing.

LE BOUQUET came in sight off to port, and Craven summoned Hennessy from below. At the same moment, John Lee touched his arm and pointed back. Creeping up on them was a fast launch, the Point Courbet quarantine launch. Craven saw a signal run up:

I want to speak with you.

He signaled to stop the engines.

"Here, what's the matter?"

Hennessy appeared, puffing, as the vibrant thrum of the engines ceased. Craven pointed to the launch, and the golden-brown eyes flashed upon reading the signal.

"——" said Hennessy. "Now what, I wonder? Who's that chap in the bow?"

"Stranger to me," was Craven's laconic reply.

The launch rapidly came alongside. In her bow, beside an officer, stood a tall, thin man clad in black, and wearing a wide shovel-hat.

"Blasted preacher!" said Hennessy, glowering. "Coming aboard, too. Might be anything—this is their one official bumboat, serves as everything from ferry to inspection barge! Nothing wrong with your clearance?"

"Nothing," said Craven, puzzled. "Cleared for Saigon, all shipshape. Here he comes. Those men of ours don't need orders, eh?"

"Not often," said Hennessy.

One of the men forward had flung a line, caught by the launch. She came in alongside the yacht and another line was passed. Poised on her rail, the black-clad man leaped aboard and stood looking up at the bridge-rail where Hennessy and Craven were standing.

"May I have a word?" he asked in English. "Who's the captain?"

"Come up," said Craven, astonished. He found himself once more dealing with a palpable American—lantern-jawed, quietly

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alert, with a certain drooping meekness in his air, a subjection almost amounting to humility.

The stranger mounted to the bridge, looked from Hennessy to Craven, removed his hat.

"My name is Athaniel Tabberton," he said, his voice carrying out the same singular impression of humble subservience. "I arrived in Port Coubert last night expecting to proceed to a missionary post at the mines, and found awaiting me orders to reach Saigon instead, at the earliest possible moment. I was informed that you are going to Saigon, and some of my good friends had the officials bring me after you, in hopes that you might afford me passage to the southern capital. If you can do this, Captain—Craven, I think?—it would be—"

"I'm under charter to Mr. Hennessy, here," said Craven. "It's up to him, Mr. Tabberton."

"Quite out of the question," said Hennessy shortly. "I'm not going direct to Saigon, Reverend. May not get there for a couple of weeks. I'm spending a few days here in the bay, looking at the islands, and then I'll drift along down the coast. You can shoot over to Haiphong and catch a coaster tomorrow, and beat me by a fortnight."

Mr. Tabberton looked embarrassed. He cleared his throat, flushed slightly, twisted his hat in his hands. The curt repulse had evidently wounded him deeply.

"I—ah—you do not quite understand, I fear," he said awkwardly. "It is not so much a question of speed with me. I am in a most unfortunate predicament! My funds and baggage have been stolen—last night in Port Courbet. I—"

"Nonsense! I'll give you the money for your passage," growled Hennessy.

"But it isn't a question of money!" blurted out the other desperately.

"Then what the—— is it?" snapped Hennessy, getting red in the face. "Is this some blasted joke?"

"It's—it's a question of fame!" cried Tabberton. "It's my whole reputation, everything! Among the articles taken from my valise, was my precious manuscript, my lifework! It was to be handed over to Bishop Smith in Saigon—my years of labor, an exegesis of the thirty-nine articles as applied to missionary fields in the Orient! I have no other copy. The authorities promise to recover it—they will send it on to Saigon. If I arrive without it I am a ruined man—my whole appointment and position out here will be suspect!"

Hennessy blinked in astonishment. In the man's face and words was something unutterably tragic. Yet it was tenfold more tragic to conceive so much tragedy about so little a thing, at least to Hennessy. Here was something he could not quite comprehend.

"I think you're off your head," he said.

"I'm not!" exclaimed Tabberton vehemently. "Haven't I made it clear to you? If I have a few days, a week perhaps, I can write out an exposition of the work, enough to prove my points and establish myself! If I go direct to Saigon, penniless, with nothing, I am worse than ruined. I implore you to take me with you, sir! I shall be no trouble, I assure you—give me a little nook where I can work and I shall molest nobody. I have pens, ink and paper—"

He broke off his pitiable appeal, out of breath.

The officer standing in the prow of the launch, below, lifted his hand. Tabberton could not see him, but Craven could, and Hennessy likewise. The officer grinned, and then made a gesture—silent, but extremely significant. The French are excellent at pantomime.

This gesture explained everything. It said that Tabberton was probably a lunatic, the French wanted to be rid of him, and the yacht was elected for the job. It even held a concealed threat. Hennessy growled an oath and looked inquiringly at Craven, who nodded.

"My lord," growled Hennessy, "I don't want anybody along—much less this fool!"

Craven shrugged. Tabberton, ignoring the insult, broke in imploringly.

"I'll not interfere, my dear sir! Out of mere charity, I beg you to assist me! To you this means nothing, I realize; but to me—think! It means everything! You can do so much for me, if you will!"

Again the officer gestured, this time decisively. Forward, the ship's bell struck six bells—eleven o'clock. Hennessy swallowed hard, and submitted. He yielded less to any feeling of charity than to the gesture from the French officer. Craven wondered a little at this. It looked as if Hennessy wanted very much to avoid any trouble.

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"—— it, then, come along," he said. "Got any baggage?"

"My valise only."

Mr. Tabberton turned and asked the officer to put his valise aboard. An immense battered grip, almost as large as a small trunk, was passed up. The lines were cast off and the launch chugged into life, turning back. Tabberton came to Hennessy.

"My dear sir," he declared impressively, his gaunt features very earnest, "you have this day performed a worthy action. You may be a man of the world, sir, yet I see you have a warm heart, and I offer you—"

"All right, Reverend, don't mention it," cut in Hennessy, and mopped his brow, It was a hot day, even here in the passage. "You run below with Cap'n Craven and he'll give you a spare cabin. But mind this," he added quickly, "I've got work to do, and I don't want to be bothered with religious talk or questions!"

"My good sir, I assure you of my discretion," said the beaming "reverend."

"Get along," said Hennessy to Craven. "I'll take her over now."

Craven escorted the passenger below.

III

THE *General* lay at anchor beside Ile Haute, just inside the entrance to the Casque channel. All about her towered the summits of bald rock, apparently a solid mass—the tri-pointed Ile Haute, the hummock of La Mouche, ahead the Casque and the jagged pinnacles of Medusa. Off to starboard rose the long hills of the larger islands.

Sunset was at hand. The evening promised star-brilliance, no moon, clear glistening waters, a cool current of breeze. Craven, in clean "whites", lounged out of his cabin and discovered Hennessy standing in the stern with glasses, looking apparently at the Medusa peaks.

"Hello!" said Craven. "Mess is about ready. Anything worth watching?"

Hennessy nodded soberly.

"Craft keeping an eye on us."

"Black one, with two lateen sails?"

"How'd you guess?" Hennessy's gaze narrowed.

"Noticed her this morning. —— fast, too."

"If she follows us tonight, she'll need her speed—"

"Tonight?" exclaimed Craven. "You'll not try the channels at night?"

"No, not the channels. In among the islands."

Craven whistled. Just then rang out the mess-call, and they started forward. They came upon the unwelcome passenger near the companionway. He was leaning over the rail, and straightened up to face them with a look of mild surprize.

"Evening, gentlemen, evening! Quite a strong current here, isn't there? Two miles an hour, I should say."

"And how the—— would you figure that out, Reverend?" said Hennessy with a subtle air of challenge. The other waved his hand.

"Calculations. I have been standing here calculating the drift of a match-box. Was not that the dinner call I heard?"

"You heard right," Craven laughed. "Come along below."

During dinner, Hennessy maintained silence, covertly studying Tabberton with a certain astonishment, as though failing to comprehend the reverend gentleman. Tabberton was impervious to the scarcely concealed dislike, however, and proved himself a ready talker in his gauntly earnest fashion, discoursing nimbly on the thirty-nine articles and other theological topics. Craven maliciously prodded him whenever the talk languished, until at length Hennessy gulped down his coffee, snorted with disgust, and tramped out on deck for a peaceful smoke. Then Tabberton turned his attention to Craven, with a series of questions quite uncovering his host's past and recent history. This contrast to his former self-centered air amused Craven.

"Why the interest in me, Reverend?" he asked, lighting his pipe. "Brand from the burning, maybe?"

Tabberton's severe features relaxed.

"Not at all," he rejoined. "I take men as I find them, Mr. Craven, and judge none. I do my duty, that's all. No, I'd not even judge the pirate, Allan, that bloody man whose dark deeds have stained all these shores!"

"Pirate? Never heard of him," said Craven with interest. "Who is he?"

"He is not—he was," came the succinct response. "Some years ago he was a scourge in these waters. An Englishman, or American, who led a crew of yellow scoundrels, engaging in outright piracy on water and robbery and pillage on land. An

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expedition from Haiphong at length exterminated his band, sunk his pirate craft, and wiped out his harborage. He was blown up—more correctly, blew himself up with his ammunition and treasures, and so died."

"Hm! Rattling good yarn at the end," commented Craven. "Sounds like an old-fashioned sea story. The place was around here?"

"Somewhere in these waters," returned Tabberton vaguely. "I really could not say just where. It had a peculiar name—the dragon with a colored tail—"

"Eh? White-tailed Dragon?" exclaimed Craven.

Tabberton blinked at him.

"I believe that was it. You have heard of it?"

"No, but there's an island by that name on the chart, somewhere. Well, let's get on deck, if you've finished."

"Thank you, but I'll return to my own cabin, where I'm at work."

Craven sought the bridge, and soon thought no more of the odd tale he had just heard. It might have some connection with Hennessy's quest, and the pirate Allan might have been responsible for the loss of the bank shipment. But all was far in the past, and Craven soon found himself occupied with work on hand. Hennessy was rattling in the cable, and was pointing the *General* for the Pass of the Mouche, where it diverged from that of the Casque.

"Hold the summit of the Eagle touching the northwest extreme of Van Doi," said Hennessy to John Lee, who was at the wheel. "Look out for the drift. Hello, Craven! Got any night-glasses aboard?"

"Pair in the locker—I'll get them."

The engines purred, the yacht crawled on between the jagged summits to either hand, and then her speed quickened. Craven stood beside Hennessy at the break of the bridge, both men watching the channel closely. To their right towered the huge masses of Dao Trao, a tremendous bulk; smaller islands and islets lay all around and ahead, and in the clear night air it was not hard for John Lee to keep his bearings by the high Eagle peak, a distinct notch against the starry heavens.

"No sign of her," said Hennessy abruptly.

"None," said Craven. "Is she definitely trailing us, then?"

"Yes." The night seemed to bring the two men closer together, drowned out the subtle antagonism lurking between them in the daytime. "They'll know what I'm after, and they'll know I'm the only man can find it. Any arms aboard?"

"Three rifles and a pistol."

"Plenty, with what I've got. They may simply watch us from a distance until we locate the spot, and then come down on us. Looks like shooting."

"Many of them?"

"Enough."

Time passed. Once or twice Hennessy ordered Lee to shift the course slightly, and held the yacht on at speed. Down in the bow the men were grouped together, watching, expectant, as though knowing what would come next and waiting for it.

"Half speed—slow!" commanded Hennessy suddenly, and turned. "I'll take her myself."

He disappeared inside the pilot-house. The head of the yacht swung. Off to the right, the long headland of Dao Trao ended and broke up in a mass of islands and shoals, for which Hennessy headed the yacht. Craven watched anxiously, yet forebore making any comment. It was Hennessy's job, and he seemed to know what he was about.

Crawling slowly, now, with a leadsman in the bow singing out the depth from time to time, the *General* forged in among the rocky masses, threading some intricate channel known only to Hennessy. Twice he halted her, felt for the drift of the current, forged onward once more. Half an hour dragged past, and another.

Then, abruptly, the men grouped in the bows below broke into a sudden chatter of speech, and Craven thrilled to the words he caught—"White-tailed Dragon!" They surged past a mass of cliff, and out ahead of them, clear against the stars, broke the high outline of an islet, incredibly small for its towering height, looming out of all proportion, a jutting spur of rock dwindling down to one side and running along the water in a reef barely showing. Whether this singular outline caused the name or not, Craven could not tell, but he knew that here was the lair of the pirate dragon, the lair of Allan, who had blown up himself and his looted hoard together.

No evidence showed of any human abode on the little shore-line. Hennessy held on, stopped the engines suddenly and crackled

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out an order. The men below fell to work, winches rattled and banged, the anchor plunged. Hennessy called an order to the engine-room, then came out and stood beside Craven. He lighted a cigaret.

"All set," he said cheerfully. "They'll lay out a line astern—leave it to 'em. Good men, those."

"Very good," said Craven. "They seemed to recognize the spot."

Hennessy's cigaret-end glowed and glimmered for a moment, redly.

"Used to be a pirate outfit along this way," he said at length. "I was on a boat they captured, and was brought here. The head of the crowd was not a bad sort—let me go, after I'd been here a good while."

"Allan?" said Craven.

"Heard of him, have you?"

"Briefly."

"The same, yep! I picked up a few of his men. I've a pretty good knowledge of things here—Allan didn't mind showing me around. I know more than any of the chinks know."

"I heard he blew himself up with his treasure," said Craven, "when the French dropped down on the outfit."

"He was that sort," said Hennessy. "I've waited a long while. Things are safe now. But those chinks suspect something. There are a good many of his old men hanging about. Those we've got aboard are from the gang, but they all know me. They'll shoot square with us. Not the other crowd—a bad gang, there! Well, we've got the island in front of us. Go ashore in the morning. Look here! Something about that blasted reverend I don't like."

"He's right enough," said Craven, laughing. "Earnest, kindly soul."

"Hm! Maybe you think so—I'll trust him as far as I can see him. What business had he floating a match-box, huh? Two-mile current, says he, and rip me if it ain't just that! How'd a preacher know, huh? Calculation, like ——! Show me any preacher can calculate the drift of a tidal current, and I'll take off my hat to him."

"What do you want to do—maroon him?"

"I'll do worse'n that if he sticks his nose into my business," snapped Hennessy, quick steel in his voice. Then he turned away. "Well, so long! Safe enough to turn in here with a watch set. See you in the morning."

Craven did not hurry, but stood a long while by the bridge rail, staring out at the pinnacle of rock lifting against the starry sky.

He no longer wondered about Hennessy—the man had seen fit to give out his own story frankly enough, and the board was clear in this direction. Hennessy had as much right as anyone else to try and lift Allan's hoard, and if he could get it out of French waters he could make a settlement with the bank and other owners, and get a rich thing out of it.

What about Tabberton, though?

Craven was not so sure. Perhaps his suspicions had been jogged by Hennessy, perhaps not. Tabberton's manner did not go with his face—a strong face, too well balanced to admit ready credence in the man's air.

Earnest enough, yes, but Craven had met more than one reverend in his day, and he did not find this theological-minded man true to real life, exactly. True to fictional type, it might be. However, the explanation perhaps lay in some innate hypocrisy, some playing up to what the man thought was proper form. Then Craven forced the whole matter away with a laugh.

"Rank nonsense! Because we're on an errand none too legal, we're apt to smell a rat every time a bird scratches on the roof. Hennessy is bugs about this treasure of his. All his little world centers around it, and small wonder. We've run up against a wandering preacher who's more of a theologian than a man of the world, and we find him hard to understand—there's the long and short of it. And meantime—good night to you, White-tailed Dragon!"

He waved his hand at the looming pinnacle of rock, and went below.

IV

CRAVEN turned out early, abandoned his pajamas, summoned the steward, and on the after-deck enjoyed bucket after bucket of clear cold water flung over him. While he was rubbing down, the steward grinned, and spoke in his mingled dialects.

"Mist' Tab'ton, him velly fine man, sir!"

"Huh?" Craven stared over his towel. "Fine man, is he?"

"Yes, sir. Him makee same thing along you—him first-chop tuan, velly big!"

Gestures accompanied the words, and Craven comprehended that Tabberton had already had a morning bath, and the steward was praising his build. Come to think of it,

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the missionary was no weakling in figure.

"And where's he now—dressing?"

"Him gone along topside."

Craven dressed, and then went topside also, but Tabberton was not in sight when he gained the bridge. Craven caught a hail, looked down, and saw Hennessy below forward, two men dousing him with water. He waved a hand and went on into the chart-house.

Tabberton was there, looking at a chart outspread on the table.

"Good morning!" he exclaimed, glancing up. "Most interesting, this map! I really believe I have found our location, Mr. Craven!"

The chart was strange to Craven, who saw instantly it must be one of Hennessy's boasted charts. It looked new, and was done very neatly on blueprint paper, and showed the portion of the archipelago in which they now lay. It was nothing like the French government charts in the chart-locker, however, and Craven leaned above it in swift interest.

"Good piece of work," he observed.

The thoroughness of it astounded him. This maze of islands was pricked out with minute care and surprizing knowledge. Depths were everywhere indicated, and ground; reefs were most amazingly shown in detail, and everywhere were masses of microscopic writing, with not a few Chinese characters as well.

"By George," exclaimed Craven, "if he got hold of this while he was a prisoner—"

"Eh? I beg your pardon?" interposed the missionary blankly. "This is not your chart?"

"It belongs to Mr. Hennessy," came the curt response.

"Well, is this not our location? Here is a view marked, and certainly it corresponds with the singular rock formation facing us—look!"

Craven looked, and nodded. He saw the White-tailed Dragon with two indicated anchorages, and minute views to give the directional bearings. That the island was so named, became clear from the Chinese characters neatly limned on the chart. Directly opposite the yacht's position, too, he saw a tiny cross marked on the shore. Instinctively, he lifted his head and looked out to see what it indicated. The shore was empty—low cliff, almost sheer from the water's edge, becoming higher and higher as it extended, until the main pinnacle of the islet rose almost in a plumb line to a height of three hundred feet.

"Coming down to breakfast, Mr. Tabberton?" asked Craven, turning. The parson nodded and rubbed his hands.

"Excellent idea! Do you know how long we shall be anchored here?"

"Several days to several weeks, for all I know. Why?"

"Er—if possible, might I bring my work on deck, to some sheltered nook? I fear my cabin will be rather warm—"

"Take the stern deck. Tell the steward to set you out a table beneath the awning, and make yourself comfortable. You'll not be in the way there."

"I do not wish to be in the way." Mr. Tabberton spoke earnestly, with a trace of nervousness. "I perceive that Mr. Hennessy does not like me, and—"

Craven faced the man on sudden impulse.

"None of that!" he said sharply. "You're not the fool you try to appear. I don't know and don't care what your game is, but cut out this acting up around me! Be yourself, whatever you are, and we'll get on."

He caught a blank stare from the *padre*, but in the deep eyes was a glimmer of something, telling him his words had gone home. He turned abruptly and went below. Tabberton followed, and showed up at breakfast looking rather thoughtful and keeping silent.

Hennessy, a glitter of excitement in his eyes, was in a hurry for once.

"Grab a bite and come on," he said, gulping down his hot coffee and leaving his chair. "I'll have the boats ready. Tide's on the ebb—got to catch it so."

He vanished above. Craven hurried through the meal, exchanging little speech with Tabberton, and then followed. On gaining the deck, he paused.

Two boats were lowered. Besides John Lee and the steward, eight yellow men had come aboard at Port Courbet, and all eight of them were now busily engaged getting certain boxes into the boat, with tools, and lading in supplies. It struck Craven with singular force that he was no longer master of his own craft. This man who had chartered the yacht, was the actual master, whose orders were obeyed without question. Craven doubted if the men would work so for him.

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A little anger rose in him, but he choked it back—the feeling was unreasonable. This Hennessy was not exceeding his authority. Craven realized, with distaste, that his real sense was one of rebellion against the strength in Hennessy; the strength of character, of personality, of iron will, of dominance. If he let this rebellion grow on him, it would be dangerous folly.

"Human nature, I suppose," he said to himself, and grimaced. "Jerry Craven, you're a fool! Quit it, and try to be half as efficient a man as this Hennessy."

He went forward, and Hennessy gave him a wave of the hand.

"Take the starboard boat, will you? I'll take the other. Quartermaster, I expect you to keep a sharp lookout. If you see any other craft approaching, blow the whistle twice—steam will be up for some time yet."

John Lee, standing to one side, said nothing but looked calmly at Craven.

"Do so," said Craven.

"Aye, sir."

Hennessy looked from one to the other and his lip twisted, but he made no comment.

By the time Craven and four men were in their boat, Hennessy's four were already pulling away in the other, and Craven followed their course straight in to the shore. Now, knowing what to seek he could see more to the place. To one side had once stood buildings and a jetty, as a few ruins testified, but Hennessy was not heading for what remained of the blown-up jetty. He was heading straight away for the low cliffs, mounting perhaps thirty feet high and above running into the high peak of the island. Here, Craven perceived, was sufficient space on the ebb tide to beach the two boats, and little more. There was a wild mass of rubble mounting half the surface of the cliff—great boulders and fragments of naked rock piled deep.

The yellow men were avid with excitement, chattering among themselves. None were young, two or three were even old. Now knowing them to have been members of Allen's pirate band, Craven could appreciate their feelings on thus returning to the scene of their old activities. John Lee had been right in scenting something among them. Suddenly Craven found Hennessy standing up and calling back to him.

"Hold off, Craven! Don't land yet. I want to set off a couple of charges first."

Craven spoke to his men, and they rested on their oars, fifty feet from shore. The other boat swept in. Hennessy, holding a small leather grip, leaped ashore, stumbled, recovered, and stood upright. His boat backed away and joined that of Craven. All eyes were centered on the figure of the man below the cliffs, waiting.

It was obvious Hennessy knew just what he was about, and had come prepared for this moment. He scanned the cliff face for an instant, then stooped over his bag, rose again, went directly to a spot midmost of the rubble, and climbed over the fallen boulders. Behind him trailed a thin black serpentine line—insulated wire. Craven thought. So, then, he was going to use dynamite!

Hennessy paused, calculated his position, and then stooped over his work. When he had planted one charge to his satisfaction, he went to some distance and planted a second. Craven began to appreciate what was intended here. Hennessy wanted to clear away this mass of rubble, or perhaps to burrow through it. Was this the spot, then, where Allan had blown himself up? Could this little patch of rock on the shore cover the pirate and his treasure? Unlikely in the extreme. The high water mark was a good two feet above the foot of the cliffs, and no buildings could ever have stood there.

Thankful he had brought his sun-helmet instead of a cap, for the morning glare was fast becoming unbearable. Craven lighted his pipe and watched operations. The charges planted, Hennessy made his connections and then came back to the water's edge, clambering over the loose rock. He waved his arm and called.

"Farther back, Craven!"

Craven obeyed, and the boats fell back another thirty feet. Hennessy caught up his grip and his trailing line, jerked it clear of rocky obstructions, and passed along beneath the adjacent cliffs, which would shelter him from the force of the blast. There he began to connect batteries together, and presently knelt.

HE LET off the blast without warning. A mass of rock lifted and scattered from the rubble, which was hurled in all directions. When the dust-cloud cleared off, Craven saw a deep dent made in the mass, and what remained was much broken up. The yellow

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men uttered a yell and gave way without orders. Glancing back at the yacht, Craven saw the shape of John Lee standing on the bridge, and beside him a tall, black-clad figure.

As the boats came in to the shore, Hennessy ran forward, a blaze of eagerness in his eyes, then checked himself and waited to light a cheroot, deliberately mastering his excitement. He looked at the pile of rock appraisingly, thoughtfully, and finally turned to the yellow men.

"Four work," he said. "The others row us back, then return."

Hennessy stepped into Craven's boat before the latter could land. The men were putting tools and supplies ashore.

"No use stopping here," said Hennessy, coming aft. "Hot as blazes! We'd better rig the for'ard awning on your craft and be comfortable."

He met the puzzled gaze of Craven, and a smile grew in his eyes, though it did not touch his lips.

"Well?" he asked bruskly. "What are you wondering about?"

"What you're spending dynamite on," said Craven frankly. "I didn't want to seem inquisitive —"

"Oh, bosh!" Hennessy sat down and his piercing eyes settled on Craven's face. "Look here, you and I know where we stand. We're not hitched, and I've not told you the exact truth by a long shot—that's the sort we are. Ain't it so?"

Craven grinned.

"Looks that way, Hennessy! We're not hitched, but we're not after each other's throats."

"Good man."

The other nodded approvingly, and Craven felt ashamed of his past feelings. He liked Hennessy, he now realized.

"No, we're not weak fools—we're men! Well, all the loose rock yonder covers the entrance to a temple, to call it so—a grotto in the rock. It was Allan's headquarters. When he blew it up, he was inside and so was his loot. I'm gambling he did nothing more than pull down the face of the cliff, understand? In such cases, we can get through to the opening in a few days, perhaps less. If I'm wrong, a week's work will show it up."

The boat unladen, the four men shoved her off and began to row out. Craven headed automatically for the yacht.

"I see," he commented. Then—"Just how sure are you of these men?"

"A lot more than I am of your quartermaster," said Hennessy unexpectedly. "I don't like his looks or his actions. Take a squint at him now, and that blasted reverend!"

Craven obeyed. He perceived the two men on the bridge of the yacht in animated conversation. Tabberton, at least, was talking and John Lee listening. Then Tabberton abruptly turned away and descended the ladder, and vanished aft.

"Hm!" said Craven. "I'll answer for Lee."

"I'll take nobody's answer except my own," said Hennessy, with a grim intonation. "As for these eight men, they know what I'm after and they know me. They get a share in anything we recover, and we can gamble absolutely on them. It's because I wouldn't give the other chaps a share that we're being trailed."

"Nothing in sight," said Craven, his eyes sweeping the scattered islands and waters. "How do you know we're trailed?"

"Because I know those chinks, and I can feel we're watched."

Craven made no answer to this. He had suddenly become interested in two things. One was that conversation between John Lee and Tabberton, which he meant to probe. The other was Hennessy.

For now he divined in Hennessy a tightening, as it were, of every nerve and muscle. Imperturbable and cool, the man was like a steel blade hitherto unsharpened, now brought to a razor edge, instinct with danger. As a matter of fact, it was nothing more than a casting off of restraint. Craven was seeing the real Hennessy, the man with tremendous issues at stake, ready to fight for them at the drop of a hat.

They came aboard and Craven called John Lee. The stolid yellow man approached.

"Lee, what was Mr. Tabberton saying to you?" Craven demanded abruptly, while Hennessy listened. The unfathomable black eyes dwelt upon him calmly.

"He was asking if I was a good Christian, sir. I said no."

These words pricked the bubble of suspicion, of angry suspense. Hennessy's rare smile appeared. Craven broke into a laugh. So simple and natural, after all!

"Get the steward and rig the forward awning," said Craven.

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V

THE morning wore into afternoon without incident, while the yacht swung idly at her moorings, and ashore the eight coolies labored at the pile of rubble under the cliff, making progress slowly but surely. Not a sail broke the occasional expanse of water between the scattered islets, nor the dot of a fishing craft. Indeed, the yacht seemed inclosed on all sides by towering rock, an empty waste of granite and water, with the huge plateau of the Trident looming to the south and Ile Longue cutting off the northern horizon with its high-ridged backbone.

Tabberton had the afterdeck to himself. He was busy there with pen and paper, Bible and prayer-book, laboring earnestly and with concentration. It was hot here under the land, and to bide below was next door to impossible, for the encircling islets cut off all breeze.

Craven and Hennessy kept to the forward deck, watching the work ashore, reading, talking little. Hennessy was continually poring ovér a small chart or plan, and making notes on it. Though from time to time he swept the broken horizon with its prismatics. With mid-afternoon he rose and yawned.

"Water's safe enough here," he said to Craven. "What about a swim?"

"No sharks?"

"None."

Craven nodded. Seeming a trifle ashamed of his former surliness, Hennessy sent Tabberton an invitation by the steward to join them, and presently the long black figure made its appearance.

"Gladly, gladly!" exclaimed Tabberton. "Swimming is my one form of physical exertion. I will retire to my cabin —"

"Retire be hanged," said Craven, kicking off his pumps. "No ladies around. Come on!"

Tabberton hesitated, then assented. He undressed slowly and carefully, folding his clothes in a methodical manner. Before he was half-stripped, the other two men had plunged from the rail and were reveling in the none too cold water.

Craven fancied himself as a swimmer, but was amazed to find himself far behind Hennessy. The man was a human fish. Craven could beat him at fast work, but was nowhere near him in endurance, and once was certain that he had stayed down close on to two minutes, swimming along the clear depths with powerful ease. They did a quarter-mile and back before remembering their unwelcome guest, and then Hennessy flung out an arm.

"Look at him— calls it physical exertion!"

Craven laughed a little. Tabberton was paddling about near the yacht's ladder, making a good deal of noise and doing little. Yet, as they came up, Craven was astonished at the man's build, and realized why the steward had commented on it in the morning. Tabberton was a mass of gaunt muscle, and across his chest were two ribbed cicatrices. When they climbed to the deck above and took towels from the steward, Craven gazed upon the missionary with no little surprize.

"Man, you must be strong as a horse!" he exclaimed. Tabberton blinked gravely.

"I am not a weakling," he rejoined. "I have been much about the world, and thanks to my constitution, have never been ill a day."

"I believe it," grunted Hennessy, and threw his towel aside. "Who carved you up?"

Tabberton touched his scarred chest!

"You refer to these old hurts? They came sir, from falling out of an apple tree when I was a lad—a nasty fall upon sharp rocks."

Craven chuckled at this and struggled into his clothes.

When he had dressed, Tabberton disappeared aft. Craven sank into his deck chair and lighted a cigaret, but Hennessy refused one growlingly. Craven smiled.

"What's the grouch about?"

"Rocks!" The golden-brown eyes snapped angrily. "Who ever heard of sharp rocks under an apple-tree? That blasted reverend—ar-r-h! I'd like to wring his neck!"

So savage was the look, so bitingly emphatic were the words, Craven fell into troubled silence. Hennessy examined his papers, felt in his pockets, crackled out an oath and then summoned John Lee, who was descending from the bridge.

"Quartermaster! See anything of a paper lying about the deck?"

"No, sir," rejoined Lee.

He glanced around. Hennessy leaped up and glared.

"Impossible—couldn't have blown away—no wind! Yet I could swear I left it here —"

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"What's lost?" inquired Craven, and Hennessy flung him an angry glance.

"The plan I was working on, blast it all! No luck since that blasted reverend came aboard! I can reconstruct it from memory, but it'll play merry —— if — nonsense, though. It couldn't reach the wrong hands. Nobody about."

"Chart?" queried Craven languidly.

"Plan of the workings ashore, if we ever get into them," snapped the other. Hennessy was more agitated than Craven would have believed possible.

The deck was searched unavailingly. The steward, summoned, could offer no explanation, and when it was evident that the paper was gone, Hennessy looked at John Lee.

"You were up on the bridge the whole time we were swimming?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where was the steward?"

"Down below, sir. Not a soul on deck, until the steward brought up the towels."

Hennessy relapsed into growling oaths. Craven had just tossed the end of his cigaret over the rail, when the heavy tread of Tabberton was heard, and the missionary appeared.

"I—ah—I beg your pardon for intruding," he exclaimed, "but I understood these islands were uninhabited? Yet certainly there are men ashore—"

"Oh, you blasted fool!" groaned Hennessy. "They're our men, working for us!"

"You misapprehend, sir. I refer to the large island yonder," and Tabberton gestured toward the Trident, blocked from their sight by the superstructure. "Now, if it were possible for me to visit them and inquire after their spiritual —"

"It's not possible," snapped Hennessy. "Come on up, Craven! I told you they'd be on top of us!"

With these words he was darting for the bridge. Craven followed more slowly. He had just recalled the slowness with which Tabberton had undressed, and how the man had been there for some little time after they had plunged overside. Yet to suspect Tabberton of deliberately stealing the plan, of no earthly use to him, were rank folly.

Joining Hennessy on the bridge, Craven procured glasses and with him scanned the high cliff on this face of the Trident. Half a minute later they picked up the figures of several men on the cliff, and these shortly vanished from sight.

"They've set a watch on us." Hennessy was quite cool now, and laying aside his glasses, lighted a cigaret. "Good! The minute they discover just what we're up to, and when we locate the entrance to the grotto, we can expect trouble. Until then we're safe. Hm! I don't think I'll take any chances. I'll leave you in charge here tomorrow, Craven."

"Eh?" Craven gave him a look of surprize. "You're not going to hunt down those chaps on the cliff?"

Hennessy almost laughed.

"Scarcely! I'm going ashore on our island here before dawn, that's all, and I'll be gone most of the morning. Cursed difficult little job, too, but I may make it. In case our men uncover an opening, you bring 'em straight along, savvy? I'll meet you."

Then Hennessy swung away into the chart-house and left Craven a prey to some bewilderment.

What the man could hope to do ashore on this naked spur of rock was a pretty problem. Something in his manner warned Craven against questions. There was more to the whole thing than he had plumbed, he began to realize; Hennessy had not uncovered his entire campaign by a long shot.

A mutter of voices came to him from below. He went to the break of the bridge and looked down. Tabberton still stood there, talking to John Lee, and now turned away and departed aft. Lee moved forward a space and bent over a flaked-down coil of line. He rose, examining something, and then came straight aft to the ladder and mounted to the bridge, holding in his hand a folded paper.

"Is this the paper Mr. Hennessy was looking for, sir?" he asked. "I saw it caught in the line—"

Craven took it and thought he recognized it. Then he looked squarely at John Lee.

"Queer business, John," he said slowly, "I know perfectly well the paper was nowhere near that line ten minutes ago. What are you up to?"

The saffron features were blank and impenetrable.

"Sorry, sir. Mr. Tabberton drew my attention to it. I could have sworn it was not there, also."

Craven hesitated, but the possibility of mistakes bulked large before him. After

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all, the plan was folded rather small, and might easily have been overlooked. He could well imagine unpleasant consequences if the deadly anger of Hennessy were unleashed against the missionary. And if trouble came, it must come upon facts, not upon possibly mistaken conjectures. With all this, however, Craven could not dismiss an uneasy sensation of something wrong, something vaguely evasive, as though he stood at the hub of a revolving circle of affairs and could get only glimpses of what was turning around him.

He made no response, but turned and joined Hennessy in the chart-house.

"Is this your plan? John Lee found it on the deck."

"Ah!" Hennessy grasped at it, and exhaled a swift breath of relief. As he opened it out before Craven, the latter could see no reason for his anxiety, since the plan of the grotto or cavern could have been of value to no one else. "Good. All clear now. Thinking the blasted thing was gone rather upset me."

Hennessy tucked the paper away in his pocket again.

"Are we going to keep steam up, or draw the fires?" asked Craven.

The other frowned and tapped on the chart table with his fingers.

"Hm! Better keep steam up, I imagine. If you don't mind, tell John Lee to order the men aboard now—he can call to them. At midnight they can return to work. It'll be better going at low tide, too. No trouble working, with a clear night sky. I'll see to keeping up a slight head of steam, enough to give us steerage way in case of trouble."

"You don't expect trouble soon, though?"

"No," answered Hennessy. "If we have any luck, the way things appear ashore, we should either open a way into the place by morning, or else find it blocked and utterly impassable. It's a question whether the fall is of loose face rock or whether the whole grotto has fallen in, you see."

"Allan didn't leave any memoir on the subject, I gather," said Craven drily.

The yellow-brown eyes swept to his face, piercingly.

"Unfortunately, no."

Queer things in that look, thought Craven. Queer things in the man, too.

Fifteen minutes later, the two boats came aboard, and the sweating yellow men went to work at the engines. They were very cheerful about it.

VI

HENNESSY was as good as his word. The boats had been left under the ladder, and he departed at midnight with all eight men. Craven saw him off and noted he carried only a large electric torch carefully wrapped in oilskin. Another oilskin-wrapped object in his jacket pocket Craven took to be a pistol. More mystery! Craven shrugged, and started back to bed, when John Lee halted him.

"Signals, sir."

"Signals? Where from?"

"From the Trident cliffs. Perhaps to some boat, sir—that black junk we saw."

There was, indeed, an occasional flash of light from the high cliffs of the Trident, and these flashes presently died away. Since only John Lee and the steward remained aboard. Craven ordered them to stand watch until morning, gave them a rifle each, and went back to sleep. Tabberton had not appeared on deck.

With early morning Craven turned out and, since the bay was safe, took a plunge over the side. Ashore, he noted the two boats drawn up and the men at work steadily. They had burrowed well during the night and had cleared a deep gap among the rocks, he perceived, almost to the face of the low cliff. No sign of Hennessy appeared on the islet.

Tabberton appeared, dropped from the ladder, and splashed around, but came in with Craven. As the two men rubbed down and dressed, on deck, the missionary gazed curiously at the shore.

"So the men are at work, eh? And is Mr. Hennessy ashore too?"

"Yes," said Craven, shortly.

Tabberton was cheerfully disposed, and chatted amiably when they went down to breakfast together; he seemed more human, more natural, and had somewhat abandoned his apologetic manner.

"Queer, isn't it," he asked presently, with an ingenuous stare, "how I was talking the other day about the pirate Allan—and here we are at his old rendezvous!"

"Yes, very queer," said Craven, and was shaken by swift impulse. "Hope you got your money's worth out of that cavern plan yesterday?"

"Eh?" The missionary's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

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Craven plunged.

"You know what I mean—didn't I see the whole thing? Smart little trick you pulled with John Lee."

"Oh!" said Tabberton slowly, staring at him across the table. "You mean about—about returning the paper?"

"Uh-huh." Craven grinned. "Just that, Reverend."

The other made a deprecatory gesture.

"Really, Mr. Craven, I am ashamed to confess it. You know, I'm quite aware that Mr. Hennessy dislikes me, and it irks me to cause any trouble. So when I found that this paper had caught in my coat lining—it was after I had dressed and gone aft—what could I do? If I brought it back, he might have accused me of stealing it. I gave it to John Lee and asked him to return it quietly, all in order to save trouble."

The earnest words swung Craven into doubt for an instant. Then he sat back in his chair and grinned.

"Mr. Athaniel Tabberton, or whatever your name may be," he declared, "you're absolutely the best liar I ever listened to! That goes without qualifications, and it's not an insult—it's a plain statement of admiring fact. However, I've told you once that I saw the whole thing, so I repeat it."

To Craven's intense astonishment, the ancient bluff worked. Tabberton relaxed in his chair, the gauntly earnest face settled in hard lines, and the dark, deepset eyes suddenly became alert and almost dangerous.

"Well," said Tabberton coolly, "what are you going to do about it?"

The very tone of the voice was new, different, harsher. For an instant Craven was speechless. Then he recovered himself, and swung into the battle-line.

"Do? What business is it of mine?" he demanded. "You've fooled Hennessy to a certain extent, but you haven't fooled me. You're no preacher. Fell out of an apple-tree, did you? Knives or bayonets made those scars, not sharp-pointed rocks. But what business is it of mine? It was a noble yarn you told when you came aboard, too—lord, what an actor you are! But I've been in Port Courbet several days, and I know blamed well there was no robbery of your effects—the buzz would have been heard for ten miles around! I've been up against those official frogs, and I know 'em. What do you want me to do?"

Tabberton smiled grimly.

"I want you to keep your mouth shut," he said without further pretense at his rôle.

"Don't want what you can't get," said Craven promptly. "My mouth's my business. Come clean! Are you making a get-away, or what's the game?"

"If I told you," said the other slowly, "you'd think I was lying."

"Undoubtedly." Craven filled and lighted his pipe. "Wherever you dropped from, you were evidently outfitted to play your rôle of preacher, and you must have raised some sort of——in Port Courbet by the way that official wanted to get rid of you."

A swift, joyous grin touched the gaunt features of Tabberton momentarily.

"True," he said. "As a matter of fact, I had to get out of town before the Haiphong police jumped me, and I made an infernal nuisance of myself, and got out."

Craven chuckled. "All right, you're out. Come clean! Robbed a bank?"

"Not yet," said Tabberton thoughtfully. "I've been tempted. You'd be tempted too, if you saw the way some of these Tonkin banks work!"

"Not me," said Craven. "These French gendarmes carry guns for just one purpose—use! And they use 'em quick. But go ahead with the confession. If not a bank, then what?"

"A mine," said Tabberton quietly. "Upcountry a bit. Government controlled mine. Stones—sapphires."

"Trot 'em out," said Craven. "Good evidence to back up your yarn."

"Can't be done. They've gone by mail from Haiphong to a friend in Saigon," said the other man. "I told you the yarn would look queer."

"It does," admitted Craven. "Privately, I still think you're lying, if you want it flat."

"Then accept the story and have done with it—you'll get no other. If you refuse to get me away, you'll have to stand a scrap."

"Hm!" Craven looked into the dark, dangerous eyes and reflected. "Who's refusing? But you don't fit the preacher rôle, and I'm blamed if you fit the bandit rôle either! Your lie this time is rotten. You could get away from Haiphong in a dozen directions—you'd never have hit for Port Courbet unless you had a purpose. And you'd never have come aboard this craft unless you had a purpose!"

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Tabberton grinned. "Do you go on instinct, or what?"

Despite himself, Craven chuckled at this.

"You won't come clean?"

"Can't be done, Craven—that's on the level. Are you actually bound for Saigon?"

Craven nodded in silence.

"Any idea when we'll get there?"

"A week, I imagine. Depends on when we get away from here. If we pull out tonight or tomorrow, we should make it easily."

"Yes, you've got speed." Tabberton reflected. "Look here, if I promise to come clean before we make Saigon, will you be satisfied?"

"I'm not worrying," said Craven. "I don't give a hang about your past—all I want to know is your purpose aboard my boat! You've got one, and you needn't deny it."

"Admitted. But I don't propose to tell it to you, just yet. I'm not going to do you any harm, if that's what's on your mind."

Craven grunted. "Thanks. I don't mean you shall. Are you on Hennessy's trail?"

Tabberton's facial muscles stiffened.

"So that's it!" said Craven. "Well, this craft is chartered to Hennessy. If you don't like it, you can go ashore and stay there. Looks like I've got you in the clear at last, eh? You and your innocent talk about the pirate Allan! You knew all the while Hennessy was after Allan's treasure, if there is any of it. You worked a clever dodge to get aboard, and you think you can grab some of the stuff, perhaps murder Hennessy, and get away. That it?"

Tabberton broke into a laugh, so genuine as to shatter Craven's hypothesis at once. Then, to Craven's abrupt astonishment, he leaned back in his chair and nodded assent.

"Yes, that's it," he said. "Hennessy doesn't know it, but I was in Allan's gang, and now I want my share of the stuff, if there is any! Satisfied, are you?"

"Why, you double-dyed lying Dutchman, you!" exclaimed Craven half angrily. "Give me any more of your——lies and I'll be tempted to hammer some truth into you!"

Tabberton leaned forward suddenly, and now there was in his face a deep and earnest look which challenged Craven's attention instantly. No lies this time.

"I can't blame you for getting riled up," said the other quietly. "Now, here's the honest truth! I don't intend to murder Hennessy or you either. I don't want to harm him, or you, or anyone else aboard, if I can help it. All I want, all I ask, is safe passage to Saigon with you. Suppose we let things rest that way, and call a halt on this discussion for the present? You'll do better to have me as a friend than as an enemy, I'll tell you so much! If you'll make it a truce, well and good. Either at Saigon, or before, I'll come clean."

"Done with you," said Craven, and rose. "I believe you this time. It's a bargain."

He went up on deck, relighting his pipe as he went.

VII

ASHORE, there was no change visible. The men were hard at work, and Hennessy was nowhere in sight. Craven stood at the rail, staring at the bare islet with somber eyes, not altogether sure that he had adopted the wisest course in making such a bargain as he had just concluded.

Something about this gaunt Tabberton appealed forcefully to him—when the man did throw off his solemn air, he became very human. The one genuine laugh of deep amusement had absolutely shaken Craven's expressed notion of things. Now, he thought to himself, he had better reconstruct the whole business.

Tabberton was not an enemy to Hennessy—so much seemed to come clear from the roiled murk of words. Those final assurances had been drawn from rock bottom. After all, Tabberton might be a fugitive, trying to reach Saigon in the south; he might be a man fleeing, not from crime, but from shame, upon him might lie some blot so dark that he would hesitate to reveal it to another white man—these things were not uncommon along the coast, as Craven's experiences in China had shown him. It might be something far lighter than murder, yet so ugly as to make other men hold him in contempt and despite.

"Yes, I shouldn't wonder if this would explain his determined evasion, even after his confession of lying!" mused Craven to himself. "I believe him when he denies any intention of doing us harm. The thing would be absurd in any event. He may feel willing to come clean just before we reach

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Saigon, where he wouldn' tdo it now at any cost. He'd not want to put in a week or ten days with other men who knew what lay behind him, but he might blow his past at the last minute, to pay for his passage as it were, and then drop out of sight. Yes, I guess this is about it."

A sudden clamor of voices ashore wakened him from his musings. The eight yellow men there had ceased their labor and were standing staring out at the yacht, waving arms, lifting voices. Craven wondered, and glanced back along the deck. Nothing was amiss—both John Lee and the steward were asleep, he knew, for he had told the steward to make up at once for the night watch. Then, looking again at the men ashore, he saw them jumping for the two boats.

Craven ran across the deck, on sudden thought. There he had view of the channel out past the Trident—and there he saw the reason for this commotion. The black junk was standing in for them, both huge sails spread to catch the light wind, and she was not a quarter-mile away.

"Tabberton! John Lee! Lui Toy!"

Craven's voice rang through the yacht and he leaped for the bridge, where the rifles and ammunition had been placed. The superstructure was tiny, containing only the bridge across the vessel, pilot and chart house, and space for an extra boat to be stowed behind. Seizing a rifle, already loaded, Craven ran to the port side of the bridge.

"Craven! What's up?" Tabberton appeared below.

"Attack, probably. Get up here."

The other obeyed, while Craven watched the black junk bearing down on them. John Lee and the steward appeared on the forward deck, and needed no explanations. By the time Tabberton gained the bridge, they were at his heels.

"Take a rifle and get into the stern, John," said Craven. "Tabberton, there's a rifle for you—join me. Steward, go down and see if there's enough steam to operate the hose. Run!"

The two boats were by this time away and pulling hard for the yacht. Through his glasses, Craven inspected the junk and saw that she had a large number of men aboard, and the sunlight glinted on weapons. Tabberton rejoined him with a rifle.

"Can you shoot?" demanded Craven. The other laughed lightly.

"Rather. I've a few marksman's medals. What's this—piracy?"

"Looks like it. This craft has been dogging us. Hennessy thinks they're some of Allan's crowd who've got wind of his intentions and mean to jump us."

"Good. Count me in to the limit."

Craven laid aside his glasses, threw up his rifle, and sent a shot over the prow of the approaching junk. The sharp crack was echoed and re-echoed from the jutting rocks around. A sharp burst of yells responded, and several guns banged out wildly. There was no doubt about the intentions of the black junk.

"Not a white man aboard, so far as I can see," said Craven. "All right, let her have it. I'll take no chances with these birds?"

The two boats were halfway out to the yacht by this time, and the junk was barely a cable's length distant, slipping on rapidly.

The three rifles began to crack. Craven fired into the thick of the crowd in the bows of the junk, and a scattering burst of shots made answer. John Lee was banging away steadily, from below, and Tabberton stood to one side.

"Got him," said Tabberton suddenly. "Ah, would you —"

He fired again, and again. The steering-sweep in the high stern of the junk fell and swung idly, as the two men at it plunged away. Smoke lifted from her, bullets and slugs from rifles and muskets came whistling around. Her head fell off. Craven descried one man who seemed in command, and plumped bullets around him until he scored a hit. The three unhurried, steady rifles accomplished more than all the confused firing from the junk; Craven was not even conscious of any danger, though once a bullet spattered on the iron pipe-rail under his elbow.

The yellow men had enough. A last ragged volley broke from the black junk, then she abruptly swung around as men leaped to her sweep and the two enormous lateen sails were hauled about. She turned tail to the yacht and went skimming away like a bird for the gap at the end of Ile Longue.

"Good work!" said Craven. "Those signals last night from the Trident brought here—she thought we were about deserted."

"Hello!" exclaimed Tabberton, turning. "She's played merry —— all the same—whew! Would you look at 'em!"

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Craven jerked about and saw the two boats, no longer at speed. Now he perceived at what the junk had directed her fire, and sharp dismay seized upon him. At first glance he thought all eight men were wiped out, for only one or two upright figures were visible in the boats. Then there was a movement, and others lifted, oars dipped once more, the boats slowly came in beneath the ladder.

Running down to the deck, Craven joined John Lee and the steward, sending the latter for medical supplies. Two of the eight men were riddled by bullets, another was dying, coughing, a slug through his lungs; three of the remaining five were hurt, but only slightly.

The five jabbered among themselves for a moment, under the ladder, then they bent to work and flung their three comrades overboard—the very death-rattle of the dying man was choked by the water. Craven was staggered for an instant by this callous action. It was too late to check them, however, and he recalled the supreme indifference of the yellow man toward the empty clay. Now the five came up over the side, the steward brought up the medicine chest, and Craven fell to work probing for a bullet in one man's arm. Tabberton lent a hand, and all three wounded were doused with iodine and bandaged. Tabberton strolled away and was lost to sight and sound. So was the black junk.

John Lee began to talk rapidly with the five men. These spoke no English, and their French was beyond Craven's comprehension. In the midst, Craven whirled. From the islet came a shot, then another, followed by a third. They were distant, presumably from the other side of the island—heavy, bursting reports of an automatic. He remembered Hennessy. Yet the bare rock showed no sign of life. Another shot, and then unbroken silence.

All stared at the islet, whose jagged contour was unbroken by any indication of life. At whom Hennessy could be shooting, was a mystery—certainly the shots had not been a signal. Then John Lee turned abruptly to Craven.

"They say, sir, they can finish the job in another half hour," he said.

"Eh?" Craven frowned. "You mean—have they uncovered an opening?"

"Yes, sir. They had just reached it when the black junk appeared."

Craven stared at the low cliff. The yellow men had made a deep gap in the mass of loose rock, working downward rather than upward. Craven imagined there must be a low opening to the grotto, partially closed by water at flood tide. He hesitated, his first impulse being to get ashore and see what was wrong with Hennessy, until he remembered his orders.

"In case our men uncover an opening, bring 'em straight along, savvy? I'll meet you."

Frowning, Craven considered this. It was explicit enough, yet he failed to comprehend how Hennessy could expect to meet them if they were to enter the grotto.

A LOW word broke from the yellow men, echoed by John Lee. Craven looked up at their excited burst of voices, swiftly rising to shrill height, and perceived a number of figures along the ridged back of the island. At once he perceived the whole thing—the junk had come to attack by water, while men had been landed at the other side of the islet to attack from that direction.

"No use going in search of Hennessy now—a dozen of them are there," he muttered. "He is either dead or safe—must have been on the other side of the islet. Now, then, shall I go ahead or not?"

Decision leaped suddenly in him. He turned to John Lee.

"Ask these men if they will go ahead and clear the opening, so we can enter. They can work there under the cliff, and will be absolutely safe. We'll cover them from the ship and hold back those rascals ashore."

John Lee chattered with the five, who nodded and responded in excited assent. It was clear they desired nothing better than to push the work rapidly.

"Very well," said Craven. "Tell them to take one boat and get to work. Better have a bite of grub first. As soon as they make an opening, I'll come ashore and go in with 'em."

The coolies assented eagerly to this, and Craven returned to the bridge.

From here he examined the scene ashore carefully. The glasses showed him nearly a dozen yellow men who seemed anything but delighted. Instead of finding the junk master of the yacht, they found themselves abandoned. Craven at once divined there was nothing to fear from them for the

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moment. Indeed, they conferred together, and then began a retreat to the other side of the island, out of sight. He laid down his glasses, chuckling.

"A good plan but it fell through. If they'd shown up at the same moment the junk came, we might have had our hands full and no mistake! Wonder if they got poor Hennessy? —— it, why haven't I more men to work with! I'll have to take chances on obeying orders, and trust to luck Hennessy knew what he was talking about. It goes against the grain to open up the grotto and not seek him first, but he's either dead or hidden. If I hear his gun again, I'll land and push across."

No further shooting sounded from the island, however. After a hasty mess of rice the five men tumbled down into one boat and pulled ashore.

Craven went below to get his pistol and extra clips. As he came into the passage, the door of Hennessy's cabin flew open and Tabberton came out. He stood stock still, gazing at the astonished and angry Craven.

"What's this mean?" snapped the latter. "Prying, are you?"

"I am," said Tabberton. "Rather, I was. I found what I wanted."

This cool retort, the entirely placid manner of the man, held Craven spellbound.

"Perhaps you'd like to rummage in my cabin too?" he said.

"No." Tabberton held up a folded paper, plan of the grotto. "I wanted this. Now I have it. Besides, we may be glad to know what we're doing ashore. It's worth fighting over, Craven. Let's drop the discussion."

"You sure have the proverbial gall of a canal-horse!" said Craven slowly. "Let's drop it, eh? All right. But this thing goes to Hennessy now, understand? when he comes back aboard. It's up to him."

"All right," said Tabberton quietly.

"Then suppose you get on deck. I'll be up in a minute. I have some arrangements to make. I'm going ashore and you'll stay here with John Lee to hold the yacht in case of any further menace from the junk. We'll get up steam enough to work the steam-hose. It means all four of us down below."

"Right," said Tabberton, and rubbed his chin in a thoughtful way. "I stay here with John Lee, eh? All right. The two of us can hold the yacht easily, with steam and rifles. And I've a couple of pistols to boot."

"You would have," said Craven acidly, and went on into his own cabin.

Weaponed, and with extra clips in his pocket, he returned to the deck. The men ashore were working, despite weariness and wounds, and they appeared to be getting somewhere. With John Lee and Tabberton and the steward at hand, Craven issued his orders.

"John, you'll stay aboard here with Mr. Tabberton to hold the ship. You'll have two rifles and the steam-hose. I'll go ashore with the steward. In case of alarm, fire two shots. Now, all of us down below and get in some coal!"

It was a hot morning. The four men stripped, and Craven led them to the engine-room. Here a little steam was up, and the fires were banked. They raked and hauled, shoveled, and in fifteen minutes had the steam beginning to climb under forced draft and a roaring fire in the furnaces.

Returning above, a plunge overside and they dressed again. Craven saw the islet empty of life—no danger was to be apprehended from that quarter, for Tabberton could drive the men there to shelter if they tried any attack, with his rifle alone. Satisfied all was going well, Craven motioned the steward down into the idle boat, and followed. As he unshipped an oar and shoved her out, he looked up at Tabberton and John Lee, above.

"In case Hennessy shows up, wherever he is, signal me."

"Right," said Tabberton. "But he'll probably meet you in the cavern."

What the——! thought Craven, as he stared up. And how did Tabberton know this—what lay behind the words? He gave it up, muttered an angry oath, and gave way on his oar.

VIII

WHILE he and the steward pulled the boat ashore, Craven wondered again how Tabberton had jumped at the chance of their meeting Hennessy in the cavern—when Hennessy was somewhere on the other side of the island, either hidden or dead! What did it mean? What did Hennessy's orders mean?

"I've got a blind spot somewhere," he muttered angrily. "Allen blew himself up

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in this grotto, or at least blew up the entrance, and probably perished of hunger and thirst later, if the explosion didn't kill him. Hennessy expects to meet us there—how the devil can he do it without coming to the entrance? The only answer is, another entrance! Yet that's out of the question. He'd never have gone to all the labor of clearing this entrance, if there were another. Likewise, if there were another, Allan would have cleared out with his loot instead of dying, and there's be nothing to plunder here. Confound the puzzle!"

He forced it out of his thoughts, as the boat's nose rasped on the shingle, and stepped out, with the steward following. A clatter of voices drew him. He saw the five yellow men resting, all of them smoking tiny sleeve-pipes. Their labor was finished —the opening was cleared.

Mounting the talus of shingle and loose rock, Craven found himself staring at a low four-foot hole in the face of the cliff, gained by a larger hole pierced through the masses of fallen stone. The prospect was anything but inviting. To right and left, and above, were still piled masses of rock, seemingly secure enough, yet holding a frightful menace in case of any fall. The idea of entering the place, and then being caught by a possible tumble of these tons of rock, was not alluring.

However, it had to be done. Craven, using the steward as interpreter, told two of the wounded men to remain at the entrance. He met with a flat refusal, to his astonishment. There was vast chattering, and he found all five men determined to enter. He recalled their past history, and did not argue. It was natural they should want to get in here at any cost. To insist would be dangerous.

"Very well! You stop out here as guard," he told the steward, who was only too happy to obey. "In case of any alarm, sing out. We'll hear you."

The five put away their pipes. Craven had brought a small electric torch with him, and with this in hand he moved forward. He paused and looked up at the jagged fragments of rock wedged overhead, and a sense of insecurity clutched at him. He dismissed it, and stooped to the opening, sending a ray of light inside. He had a glimpse of dry cavern floor, and then sight of a place so astounding that he hesitated no longer. Bending low, he scrambled through the aperture, dropped to the floor, and stood playing the light around while the five coolies entered after him. No sooner were they inside, than they promptly dropped to their faces and knocked their heads against the floor.

The reason for this was a huge gilded and gaudy wooden statue of the Chinese war-god, directly before them. Around were other images, bedecked in all the usual tinsel trappings of Chinese temples. This grotto was, in effect, a "joss-house." The walls were adorned with silken banners and incense-burners stood about.

The chamber was small and low-roofed. Playing his beam of light around as the five men rose, Craven followed their pointing hands and discovered a passage to the right —a large, smooth tunnel somewhat higher than a man. He moved toward it, as the Chinks motioned him on. It lay thirty feet from the entrance, as he discovered by pacing the distance.

This tunnel had formerly been closed by a screening door of light rattan weave. Burst away by the force of the explosion at Allan's death, this door lay on the floor of the tunnel. Craven stepped over it, seeking some traces of the wretched Allan, and seeing none. Then he realized the tunnel was bringing him to a farther cavern. A dozen feet of it, and it opened out into a high-vaulted grotto whose roof was beyond reach of the little torch. The place was of irregular size, here some forty feet across, and at the farther end dwindling to a long passage which struck downward and out of sight—at first Craven did not even perceive it, since the roof blended with the walls around.

Here, as appeared at the first glance, was the treasure-chamber of the pirate.

To right and left were piled crates and boxes, but in the center of the chamber was something more singular. Here rose from the floor a lump of rock, to the height of a man, and upon this rock was placed a great lump of vari-colored agate carved into the semblance of a dragon. Most cunningly was the work done, after the old Chinese fashion of taking into account every change of hue and so planning out the finished piece, until this dragon by its natural coloring presented the scaled and fiery aspect of a painted creature. Only the tail lacked color, and this tail was a jade-like milky white.

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Here Craven had the source of the islands's name—doubtless some relic of old worship before the days of pirates. Obviously the yellow men venerated the thing, for the five coolies kowtowed with huge respect to this white-tailed dragon of agate.

Craven began to wish he had brought the plan of the grotto which Tabberton had that same day stolen from Hennessy's cabin. Why Tabberton wanted it, what he expected to do with it, was a challenging mystery. Moving over to the side wall, Craven flashed the light about, seeking some relic of the dead Allan.

He found none. The boxes of loot did not interest him—they represented everything from bales of silk to American sewing-machines. Even drums of gasoline were piled high in one corner. Allan had been of a thrifty mind, evidently. The excitement of the five men, however, drew his attention to the opposite wall, where they had gathered. He crossed to them, and drove his light on the loot here.

This consisted of trunks, European trunks. It was clear Allan had not confined his attentions to natives alone. Two of these were somewhat apart from the others, and with a thrill, Craven recognized a huge iron-bound treasure-chest, marked with the name of the Banque d'Indo Chine. Here facing him was the lost specie shipment—pirated, not shipwrecked—half a million dollars in gold!

Craven stared at the chest. No way offered of getting into it, for it was fast locked and still sealed, nor did he care to get into it. The five yellow men were busy around the second box—a trunk, this. Now with a splintering crash they had the lid up, and Craven held his light. He expected to see yellow gold, and instead caught a glittering flash. This trunk was crammed to overflowing with loot of the Yunnan coast: gaudy head-dresses set with corals and kingfisher feathers and semi-precious stones, old bronzes, jades of all descriptions, ornaments, temple vessels, everything jumbled together.

Upon it fell the five in wild excitement, far more concerned with these treasures than with bare gold. Craven comprehended this was their promised share of the loot in case of success. Their voices rose higher. One of them jerked out a pistol and menaced the others with shrill words, until Craven caught his shoulder and whirled him about.

"Out with it!" Craven pointed to the box, then to the entrance. He imposed his will upon them, brought them out of their mad loot-lust. He switched off his light and heard their quick, panting breaths in the darkness.

"Do you understand me? Will you obey?"

They caught the drift of his Cantonese, and responded with eager assents. Craven snapped on his light, and pointed to the box and the heavier specie chest. He swung the beam of light over the other trunks piled high. Doubtless some of these were rich enough—he discerned two iron-strapped chests which might contain anything—but he was resolved to get out of here with the main loot and turn his little force in search of Hennessy. He was more worried over Hennessy than anything else.

Eager enough to obey, the two unwounded men closed the trunk again and began to slide it across the rock floor toward the passage. It was not light. The others aided as best they could, filling the cavern with resounding echoes of their shrill voices as they grunted and heaved. They fell into some sort of chant, and the noise of it became tremendous, volleyed back from all sides. Craven wished he had fetched along a line—it would have made the task easier. He directed the light, and the group of men were nearly at the passage.

SUDDENLY, with wild bleats of terror, an object hurled itself from this passage, full into them all, uttering a high scream as it caromed into the group. Craven just had time to glimpse the face of the steward, when a man was flung against him, knocked him sprawling, and sent the electric torch from his hand, to fall extinguished.

There was a moment of pandemonium. Through it all, Craven caught two sharp sounds from the outer world—reports of a rifle. By good fortune he encountered the electric torch, seized it and gained his feet. The light showed the yellow men recovering, and in the midst, the panic-stricken steward, who flung himself at Craven with a howl.

"Maste', plenty much bobbery every side—"

Pistols out, the coolies were already rushing for the passage. Craven did not

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linger to hear any more, but followed. As it was, this brief delay saved his life.

The five men shoving before him blocked the way, cursing each other angrily. They hurried on, broke into the outer chamber, and the speediest of them was crawling from the entrance as Craven came from the passage. They knew their way about this place, and he did not. The other four tore at each other, struggling for exit at the hole they had made. Craven, in the rear, looked over their heads and caught a glimpse of the yacht. Two boats were drawing in upon her, rowing rapidly—large boats filled with men. An intermittent fusilade was sounding.

Then in the twinkling of an eye Craven learned the reason for the steward's terror. From close outside came a shattering burst of shots. The two men who had left the entrance pitched down. There came a black rush of bodies shutting out the light. Craven realized that the men ashore had attacked here, while boats attacked the yacht.

Shots roared and bellowed in the grotto, pistol fumes filled the air chokingly, the screams of men resounded. The attack was met by the three remaining coolies, and was met with a will; those outside came shoving forward by sheer mass, filling the entrance. A wounded man pitched inside and began firing from the floor. One of the three spun around and died. The pistols of the others clicked emptily. Knives out, they flung forward, yelling.

Craven was taking a hand now, from behind, firing coolly and steadily at the opening. Two figures rolled in, dropped, leaped up. He shot one of them, the other dragged down one of his two remaining men. Cursing the cowardly steward, whose added weight might have meant everything at this crisis, Craven fired and fired again. Another figure dropped and rose before him, and another. Figures were massed outside, firing down. A boulder drove in and smashed Craven's last man squarely in the chest. Another followed it—

There was a terrific rumbling, roaring clash, a surging shriek, a long reverberation, as of muffled thunder. Then silence, the gasping frightful groan of a dying man, and pitch darkness.

Craven was flung from his feet by a tremendous shock, and rolled back almost to the entry of the passage before springing up, his pistol gone. His left hand still held the flashlight, and he switched it on. Nothing showed before him except a thick, choking cloud of dust and fumes, almost impenetrable. A figure loomed up before him, eyes wild, knife out, and Craven met it with clenched fist, knocked it away. Terror filled him. He turned the light down, saw his pistol lying almost at his feet, and stooped for it. With shaking fingers he put in a fresh clip of cartridges.

A shot rang out. The beam of light showed a naked yellow man springing. Craven felt the wind of the bullet, and his return shot dropped the man a yard distant. Then silence. A step forward, and the electric ray began gradually to pierce the gloom. Another step—then Craven halted, swallowed hard, stared incredulous.

Before him, where should have been dead men, interlocked bodies, was only blank rock. There remained only a little space, ten feet across, of all the chamber. The loose fragments had come down, and with them the whole face of the cliff.

IX

A SPECIES of stupor fell upon Craven with the realization of his plight. He was actually entombed alive, beyond any possibility of rescue from without.

His electric ray showed him the body of his last attacker, dead. From the pile of rock extended an arm—Craven turned away, looked no farther. He was the only living thing in this chamber of death. No sound reached him from without.

How long he remained here, he did not know. A life-size god had been overthrown, and sitting down upon the image, Craven extinguished his torch and lighted a cigaret. He felt jumpy. The tobacco calmed his nerves, and he slowly came out of his shock.

It must be nearly noon—he had left his watch aboard, after his final plunge and cleanup. He was not particularly worried in regard to the yacht. Even if Tabberton failed to repel the attack by rifle-fire, he had a more terrible and potent weapon in the steam-hose, and by this time, Craven knew, there would be a full head of steam up. Yet even as victor, Tabberton was powerless to give him the least assistance—there must be a good thirty feet of rock between him and the water.

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Presently, long after his cigaret was burned out, he became aware of slight noises coming to him from the passage, leading into the farther chamber. A queer shuffling step. He recalled the steward, still there. Probably the poor devil had no light and was in stark terror.

"A companion in misfortune, eh?" Craven rose. "Hm! I suppose in course of time he'll eat me, or I him—"

He checked himself. Too much ghastly possibility lay in the jest. Allan must have died from starvation, perhaps in some far nook or chamber.

This thought held Craven, electrified him. He remembered the dwindling passage leading from the farther room. It must lead somewhere. And thus far, no trace of Allan's body, no sign of any one having lived here, though obviously the place had remained untouched and unvisited. The electric torch was good for a long while yet.

"Good! I'll explore," muttered Craven. "Might as well die trying, anyhow. The passage may lead me to water, and I may even find food. If Tabberton beat off those pirates, he and John Lee will do something—beat back to Port Courbet, perhaps, and bring aid. My job is to live as long as possible—"

He groped for the passage behind him. From the farther chamber beyond came a shattering crash, then the fall of a body, and silence. Craven called out reassuringly to the panic-stricken steward, but received no response. He got out his torch as he groped his way along, and presently was back in the second chamber.

The finger of light reached out and fell upon the broken trunk, abandoned close at hand. Beside it lay the steward, senseless and outstretched. Craven stepped toward him, then checked himself—let the poor devil remain oblivious as long as possible! Yet what could have caused the peculiar crash, as of something smashing on the rocky floor? Nothing was here except the senseless steward and the trunk. Wondering a little, Craven swept the light around the place, and brought it to an abrupt halt.

The white-tailed dragon of agate had fallen from its pedestal and shattered.

For a moment Craven stood trying to account for his feeling of something amiss, then he comprehended. From the body of the steward to the jutting pedestal of rock was twenty feet or more—closer to thirty, thought Craven. Obviously, then, the steward could not have caused the fall of the image. Perhaps its fall had been brought about by the roaring shock of the cave-in, and had frightened the poor steward senseless. Still—

Craven walked over to the pedestal, which was several feet in diameter, rudely carved from living rock, and came to the height of his eyes. The top was perhaps a foot across. A glitter there caught his eye. He leaned forward, stretched on tiptoe, and saw a handle of brass, over which the dragon had been placed.

"Arabian Nights coming true?" he said, and laughed at the roaring echoes of his voice until his laughter raised thunderous reverberations and checked him. He reached forward and tugged at the brazen handle.

From a square aperture in the rock, he lifted a box of brass-bound teak, the size of a mah-jong case. Astounded, he gazed at it, and sighted on the front a graven brass plate. Holding the light closer, he read a name there:

J. Allan, Singapore

Some of the dead pirate's loot, then! Craven stared at the box, marveling at the manner of its revelation. The thing seemed uncanny and beyond credence. Unexpectedly, some glint on the floor caught his eye and he looked down. Shock entered into him. There at his feet lay the same large electric torch he had seen Hennessy carry off at midnight, carefully wrapped in oilskin!

"And it wasn't there when I was in here before," muttered Craven.

He wondered for a fleeting instant whether he were out of his head. With an effort, he reached out and replaced the teakwood box in the pedestal, then stooped for the electric torch. He picked it up, tried it, found it to work perfectly. Putting away his own smaller one, he sent the brighter beam around the place, stepped off to one side—

Lying senseless against the stone pedestal, whose base had previously hidden him from sight, was Hennessy.

No doubt about it, he was here. Craven glanced toward the narrow passage at the far end. He knew now whose fall he had heard. Probably the steward had been lying unconscious ever since his precipitate

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hurtling into the place. Hennessy had come, had reached up to get the box, had knocked over the dragon—and fainted.

Small wonder! The man was stark naked, his body still glistening wet with water, and over his whole right side and thigh was spread a scarlet stain of diluted blood. Examining him, Craven found a terrific gash low on his side: one rib was certainly smashed, part of it carried away—the bullet had made a bad gouge. Whether the lung were affected, Craven could not tell.

He set to work, and with shirt and handkerchief improvised a bandage of sorts. He came erect at a sound, to find the steward standing, staring blankly around. Craven spoke to him and somewhat appeased his terror, then turned and strode to the little passage. He must find what lay beyond. Hope had surged up anew in him, for it was now quite obvious how Hennessy had come here. There was an exit to the place, and this spelled salvation!

The passage conducted Craven into another and smaller cavern chamber, low-roofed, thirty feet across. At the opposite side was a pool of water, against an apparently blank wall—yet the drops of blood and the scarcely dried tracks told Hennessy had walked from this pool. Not stopping to reason out the incredible, Craven tasted the water, found it sweet, and after a drink filled his cap and hurried back to Hennessy. He poured a little between the man's lips, and bathed his face with the remainder.

The hapless steward came and crouched near-by. His terror had given place to a hopeless resignation, for being cognizant of his plight, after the manner of his race he saw certain death ahead and faced it stolidly. Only the uncertain was full of terrors.

Craven switched off his light, in order to save it, and spoke to the steward.

"There is another way out of here. Mr. Hennessy knows it, and when he comes around he'll guide us out, so cheer up. Things might be worse!"

"Aye, sir," said the steward's voice from the darkness. "Mebbeso we come topside plenty quick."

They sat for a long while, thus, Hennessy breathing hard and stertorously, as if he had recently passed through tremendous exertions. Perhaps he had, thought Craven, remembering the dark pool against the rock; but where man had come, man could go.

"Can you swim, steward?" asked Craven suddenly.

"Plenty good, sir."

Before the echoes of the response had died out, Hennessy stirred. Craven put on the light and left it burning, caught the man's hand, helped him sit up. The golden-brown eyes struck out, glanced around, settled on Craven's face.

"Hullo! What was all the rumpus about?"

"Easy does it," said Craven quietly. "Frontal attack, while boats went after the yacht. They sprung it suddenly."

Hennessy sniffed.

"Dust and blood—hm! What's happened?"

"Nothing much. Three of us left here, with Tabberton and John Lee aboard the yacht. We got steam up, so they've probably been able to beat off the attack." Craven lighted a cigaret for the other, then one for himself, and grinned. "Looks like you ran into a hornet's nest, eh?"

"And found the family at home," said Hennessy, and gingerly felt his side. "Whew! Worse than I thought. Pretty weak, but I got through. What are you hanging around here for? Let's get off and see about the yacht."

"No hurry." Craven exhaled a thin cloud of smoke. "The whole blamed front of the cliff has fallen in on us and filled up the outside chamber."

Leaving Hennessy to digest this information, he rose and went to the near-by stone pediment, drew out the square box, and set it down beside the naked man.

"Is this what you came after? It's not too heavy to take away. As soon as you're ready, we may as well start."

Hennessy looked at him, startled.

"You say—it's caved in, out front? Then God help us."

"With your assistance," amended Craven cheerfully. "We'll go the way you came in."

Hennessy uttered a curt, grim laugh, put out a hand and touched the box, and looked up.

"You're a cool 'un! You've guessed I came in the back way, eh?"

"Traced you back to the pool," and Craven nodded toward the passage.

"Hm! You don't know what you're up against. This chink, too! It's a ten to one bet you couldn't make it. I know it pretty well, and I had a —— of a job getting here.

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It's mostly under-water work, nasty work at that."

"Anything to hurt in this box?" asked Craven.

"Nothing but pearls, some wrapped notes, and a few more such things." Hennessy's eyes bit at him. "Mean to say there's only the three of us and John Lee left, besides that blasted reverend?"

Craven nodded:

"They came for us this morning—you must have heard the firing. We turned the trick easily, thought they'd gone. Then they caught us by surprise—I was in here with the men, lugging out the loot."

"The loot be dashed!" said Hennessy, and tossed away his finished cigaret. "There's all I want in this box, and honestly enough come by, too. You can't make it out of here, and I doubt if I can, the way I'm feeling."

"I can go where you can," said Craven. "And since you want the box, I'll take it along. Besides, the longer you stay, the worse shape you'll be in. That side of yours will stiffen up in no time."

"It's no bed of roses now," Hennessy winced. "It'll do for me, I'm thinking."

"Nonsense." Craven rose. "I haven't seen anything of Allan's bones yet. Where are they?"

Hennessy began to laugh—real amusement in his voice. The volleying echoes roared back thunderous mirth.

"What's the joke?" asked Craven, frowning.

"Why, you fool," snapped Hennessy, "don't you see it yet? I'm Allan!"

X

CRAVEN stood staring. Then, slowly, he got out another cigaret, and lighted it.

He had never for an instant suspected the fact thus revealed in two words, and yet it laid bare everything—he was not even tempted to doubt. He saw why Hennessy had been recognized, back there in Port Courbet, and why the yellow men were on his track still. A dozen minor puzzling points were cleared in up a flash. No wonder Hennessy knew the Bay of Halong so well!

This, too, gave the clue to Tabberton—somehow, in some manner, Tabberton knew who Hennessy was, and wanted to get his fingers on the loot. That was his reason for wanting the plan of the cave, too. Everything was made as clear as daylight in two words.

"So you're Allan!" said Craven, looking down. "And you never blew yourself up!"

"Not me." The other chuckled a little, and leaned back against the pedestal of stone. "That was all a bluff—blew in some of the cliff at the entrance. Nobody ever suspected there was another way out. At that, it's not much of a way. Sort of Hobson's choice. I couldn't carry much stuff off when I made my getaway. I had to wait a few years and come back, and now I've done it. And I'm done for."

He touched his side.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Craven sharply. "You get us out of here, and put in a couple of days between the sheets, and you'll be all right."

"I'm badly weakened," said Hennessy. He spoke coolly, thoughtfully, as one who knew what he said. "I may be good to get you out, but not much more. And you needn't fear to take along this box. It's my private property, and if I kick out, it'll repay you well. Now, as you so truly said, young man, this wound is getting stiffer than——! I think we'd better start. If you look behind those drums of gasoline, you'll find a coil or two of light, strong line."

Craven picked up the light and crossed the chamber. He found the line and brought it back—a large coil.

"Got a knife? The steward has, anyhow. Cut off enough to lash that box around your waist. You'll have to strip, so dash your modesty and go ahead."

Craven obeyed, and in five minutes had the box lashed about his waist and securely held from swinging. Hennessy appeared to have recovered all his usual iron poise, and with scarcely an effort scrambled to his feet. He ordered the steward to undress, and the yellow man obeyed. He nodded to Craven and turned.

"Come along with the light, now, and if you're in the habit of praying, get to work. You've no cinch ahead! You can leave that light behind you—no need of it at the other end. Daylight still outside, I suppose?"

"Yes, afternoon."

Preceded by the electric beam, the three men moved to the passage, Craven bearing the coil of light line. They crossed the farther chamber, which was quite empty save for the oilskins that had been around

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the flashlight, and halted at the dark pool. The steward regarded it in dumb resignation.

"There's the road," and a grim smile touched the pallid lips of Hennessy. "It's a water channel under the rock—one —— of a deep dive down, and a long swim. I came through without a scratch, this time. Last time, the scraping along the rocks laid me up for a week. You'll be sick of your job before you're half through, I can tell you!"

He caught the end of the line and knotted it about his right ankle, then carefully coiled the balance at the verge of the pool, and pointed.

"See that jutting place in the wall? Head down below it and follow the line. I'll keep it taut—if I get through. If I don't, you're done for anyhow. Tell your chink to knot the other end to his wrist, and we'll pull him through when he sticks, as he will. You'll have to swim, and no mistake. Well, here's luck!"

With this abrupt farewell, Hennessy pulled a deep breath and then flashed out in a swift, superb dive and was gone.

Craven gathered that the pool had depth from the very edge. He paid out the line carefully, keeping it free of kinks. Foot by foot it ran out, steadily. The two men watched it as it slipped away and vanished in the water. A minute passed, and another. Craven tried to count the seconds, but was not sure of his count. The time dragged like hours and hours, until suddenly the line ceased to run out. Twenty feet or so remained.

Had Hennessy got through, or was he stuck? For a moment the suspense was terrific, until the line paid out again for half the remaining length. Then, abruptly, came a slight tug, and another. Craven jerked in reply, and stood up. He drew a deep breath and looked at the yellow man.

"You understand? Get the end of that line tied about your wrist—I'll do it."

He suited action to words. The steward submitted helplessly.

"I swim plenty good, sir, chow-chow water, anywhere."

"You'd better," said Craven. "Keep your end taut, and when I signal from the other end, let go the slack. Then swim your best, and we'll pull you through."

The steward made no response, but stood passive.

Craven tested the line, perceived by its angle that the opening of the passage must be twenty feet below the surface, readjusted the box a trifle, then took a deep breath and hurled himself out in a dive.

By good luck, his judgment was excellent. His groping fingers found the line, and next instant the passage into which it led. Then he swam — swam as never in his life, husbanding his breath and strength yet making all possible speed.

He made the opening in the rock without difficulty, and the box at his waist aided him to keep down rather than hindered him, but the passage was frightful. It was impossible to keep from striking against the roof, and he knew the sharp rock was tearing at the skin of his shoulders and back. Twice he came headlong against a projection.

By daylight such a traverse would have been hard enough, but in the pitch darkness it was nearly impossible. The passage seemed interminable, and while the rope guided him, the mere effort of feeling for it lost time and headway. Good swimmer though he was, his lungs failed him at last.

Panic surged upon him. The agony under his heart became intolerable, his eyes seemed bursting, flecks of fire shot through his brain. He fought ahead desperately, then realized he could do no more, and felt for the line. He pulled himself along by this, hand over hand, careless that he scraped rock above and to the sides. Only will-power held him to it now, and finally this failed. His mouth burst open, water rushed into him—and ahead he discerned a glimmer of daylight.

Half strangled, coughing, scarce conscious what he was doing, Craven came to the surface and gasped the blessed air into his lungs. He was aware of Hennessy's voice driving sharply at him.

"This way, you fool—this way! Quick!"

He obeyed, almost by instinct. Two minutes later he was crawling out upon a lip of rock where Hennessy half lay, half sat, ghastly white and with the bandage about his side newly steeped in red. Craven relaxed, gasping, and heard the other laugh.

"Congratulations. You seem to have touched a few rocks by the way—whew! You got it, right enough."

Craven moved, achingly got to his feet, and stood trembling. Sharp flashes of pain darted through shoulders and hips and

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back. He found his calves red with dripping blood. Those rocks had scraped, indeed.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Little split in the hillside. Never been discovered except by me. Springs feed the other pool, runs down to here. That's why I picked out this island in the first place, for the fresh water. The French don't know about it yet."

Craven stared up, and then around.

Before him was a small pool, like that at the other end, scarce twenty feet across. From this pool a continuous trickle of fresh water ran, in a brooklet, down a winding path to the sea. Up above on either hand were sheer walls of rock, split by some ancient convulsion, or perhaps water-worn, the high peak of the island folded about this slim, slender crevice and hid it completely from sight. Here at the bottom was semi-daylight. The crevice was not straight, but curved sharply twenty yards distant.

"Feels like I'm pretty near done for," said Hennessy. "Better give your chink the word to come along. Lay you five dollars gold we pull in a corpse?"

"I think I'd lose," said Craven, with a shiver of remembrance.

He took the line from Hennessy, gave it a sharp jerk and another, then at the response pulled in the slack. He continued to pull it in, steadily—the steward had dived at once.

Still weak and shaky with his own near twist, Craven kept hauling on the line. After a moment there was no more slack. Hennessy's voice bit out at him.

"Pull! He's done for."

Craven pulled. It was evident the yellow man was struggling for headway, since a little more slack came in—then Craven set himself to the job and hauled, fast as he could drag in the line. He felt cold to think of the man at the other end, jerked along under those cruel rock teeth, but there was nothing else for it. Hand over hand he hauled in, until with sudden release came the end—a figure bobbed on the water of the pool, inanimate.

Grimly Craven finished his task. The body of the steward shot forward, dangling after the outstretched arm, face down, and stained the water with tinging scarlet as it came. The man had suffered, but not more than Craven himself.

No words were needed. When the saffron figure was at the shore, Craven lifted it up and worked over it, pumping, pumping, rolling water from the lungs, pumping again. Useless it seemed, until all at once a strangling cough broke from the steward, and a low groan. Craven renewed his efforts.

Two minutes afterward, the steward was propped against a rock, staring at them. Craven turned to Hennessy, whose lip showed its old sardonic twist, and got rid of the box lashed still around his waist.

"Now, old chap, what can I do for you?"

"Not a thing, thanks," said Hennessy coolly. "I've told you I'm done for—"

"You're a liar," snapped Craven, in a glow with his efforts, and careless of the pain along his back. "Give me your hand. Get your arm about my neck, and we'll start out. How far are we from the shore?"

Hennessy shrugged slightly, and allowed himself to be helped up.

"Fifty yards. From around that bend, we can see the shore. I've got my clothes and a gun cached at the bend. This thing lets us out on the opposite side of the island from the yacht. Ready!"

He was quite weak, yet summoned himself to the task, got an arm around the neck of Craven, and they started off along the edge of the brooklet, where they had space enough to walk. The steward groaned, dragged himself erect, and came stumbling along in the rear.

"Well," said Hennessy, as they progressed, "the White-tailed Dragon is done for, I guess! I'd have to come back with a whole wrecking crew to get what's in the grotto now, according to you. Let it go! I've got enough, if I pull through, but I sha'n't. If I'd not been a dashed fool, I could have pulled out with the same thing ten years ago, instead of trying to make myself a millionaire. Here we are."

They came to the bend in the deep slit, and beside the rock wall Craven saw lying the pistol and clothes left by Hennessy.

At the same instant, Tabberton and John Lee came around the bend of rock.

XI

CRAVEN halted, utterly astounded by the apparition. The arm of Hennessy slid from about his neck, and Hennessy sank down with a stifled groan upon the pile of clothes. The other two men were no less astonished, it seemed.

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"My lord!" exclaimed Tabberton. "This —we were trying to find our way along the route marked on the plan—"

John Lee stepped to one side, his eyes darting from figure to figure.

"You beat them off?" queried Craven dully.

"Sure thing. They skipped when the cliff caved in—all of them. The game was finished for them, I expect."

Upon the silence bit the laugh of Hennessy.

"You're a——of a reverend!" he said.

Tabberton made a little gesture, expressive of helplessness.

"Forget it, forget it! You chaps have had a rough time, apparently—lordy, Craven! Your back is all blood!"

Craven made no response. Hennessy's hand slid out, and the next moment his pistol was pointing up at Tabberton.

"Hands up, you ——!" he said, as he half reclined on one arm. "I've placed you now—it took me a long while! Ten years since I saw you, and then only once, in Hong Kong. What's the name, now? What is it? Andrews!"

"Andrews, yes," said Tabberton quietly, standing motionless. "And I've got a warrant for your arrest, Allan. The warrant is ten years old, but it's still good. You're wanted for piracy, and you're under arrest, Allan."

Craven blinked from one to the other. His brain refused to take in what was going on, yet dimly he understood that all the puzzles were now swept away. Something seemed to bind him fast—the game was all in other hands now.

"Well, you'll be a —— of a while serving that warrant," said Hennessy, and his teeth showed in a snarl of his bloodless lips. "I've got you! John Lee, see if this man has a gun on him, and take it away."

"Yes, sir," said John Lee, but he did not move to obey.

"Why the —— don't you do it—want a bullet in your hand?" snapped Hennessy.

"Perhaps you remember capturing the *Kum Chow*, from Canton?" said John Lee suddenly. "It was more than ten years ago—twelve years. Your men murdered every soul aboard—"

"What's that to me!" said Hennessy, and his lips curled. "Obey me! What's it to me if she and her whole blasted yellow outfit were murdered?"

"Nothing," said John Lee. "Except that my father was aboard her—"

Swift as light, Hennessy flung himself sideways, fired as he moved. John Lee had moved even more swiftly. The two reports came as one, blended, went thundering up and up along the rock crevice.

John Lee whirled about, put one hand to his heart, and then quietly fell backward into the water and lay inert. Hennessy laughed, but midway of the laugh, ended on a choking gurgle. A spot of scarlet showed at his throat—the spot grew into a spreading splotch, then became a frightful rush of blood. He sank down, coughed, and then, bowing his head, fell limply forward.

Silence came upon the place—a terrible, unearthly silence. Craven had not moved all this while, and the steward behind him stood paralyzed. Tabberton drew a long breath and then exhaled it, almost in a sigh, and his gaunt features were very drawn.

"Too bad!" he said quietly. "But it had to come, I suppose. Fate forced the thing. I never knew John Lee meant to do this. These cursed chinks! You believe me, Craven? I wanted above all else to take him in alive."

"Yes," murmured the stupefied Craven. "What's in that box?"

"Some personal stuff of his. He—he thought he'd go under from his wound, told me to keep it if he did. Honestly come by, he said. That cavern's full of loot, though."

"The specie shipment?"

"Intact."

"Good." Tabberton nodded. "Then I'll come back later, and get into it. I'm working for the Banque d'Indo Chine, Craven. I've been a detective for years. I've a contract from the bank on this job. I know you're straight enough—have known it all the while—and I didn't dare come clean, for fear you'd somehow give the game away to Allan. Lordy, how I wanted to bring him in alive! But I'll get his loot. It's only a question of bringing men and going to work."

"That's all," said Craven dully. His eyes came to rest on the body of John Lee. No need to inquire if the man were dead. Tabberton came forward, and took him by the arm.

"Come on, old chap," he said. "Come on, let's get out of here. We'll make Port Courbet, or speak a ship down the channel. We can handle your craft, can't we? There's your steward, so we're three."

Craven nodded. The three of them turned the bend in the rock wall, and stumbled toward the open shore beyond.

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CAMELOTE CAPTIVES

by H·S·COOPER

Author of "Back to the Soil," "Rawhided," etc.

I WOKE with a start. There was tramping around on the roof of my cabin and anguished voices were imploring the Saints and calling on the Captain and Cahill and myself for aid, and doing it in a mixture of Portuguese, Spanish and Guarinî-Indian talk which showed their terror.

I jumped out of my berth, opened the cabin door which led out on to deck, and one hurried glance was enough! I shut it quickly and nipped a snake in the middle, a vicious looking one about a yard long which squirmed and struck at my bare legs and feet as I hung on desperately to the door handle and pulled tighter on it. There did not seem a thing handy to smash it with until I spied, in its place right over my head, the cork life-belt kept there, and with this in hand I soon reduced Mr. Snake to a pulp and was able to close and lock the door.

And there I was, snakes outside and I dare not call Cahill, who was in the cabin just aft of me, for I was afraid that the first thing he would do on waking would be to open his door and rush into the arms, or rather the fangs or coils of a big snake. So I got hastily into my clothes and was putting on the highest pair of wading boots, my thickest coat and gloves, intending to go out and wake him from his door, when there was a tremendous rumpus in his cabin, a pistol shot, the slamming of his door and his voice shouting to me:

"Harry! Harry!! For the lord's sake don't open your door! It's lousy with snakes outside! ——'s to pay. We've drifted right into the middle of the swamp!"

My reply was, as he called it afterward, a fool one.

"Don't I know it!"

And I was going to add more when there came a smashing of woodwork in the rear of our cabins and I felt sure that one of those fifty-foot, dog-headed snakes, which the Swamp Indians tell about, had got the wind of the captain, who slept in the aft-cabin, and Mr. Dog-head was crushing in the woodwork to get at him. If that was the case we could not help him. He was big, burly and tough, and he might satisfy the present hunger of the snake. His eating would give Cahill and me more time to make a fight for our lives! Rather unsympathetic on my part, but the captain had navigated the Paraná for years and ought to have been prepared for all emergencies, even an unexpected cargo of snakes.

As suddenly as it began, the wood smashing stopped, and I heard the captain's voice, in excited polyglot river lingo, explaining matters to Cahill. And Cahill's voice came to me—

"Stand away from the partition, Harry, we're going to cut a hole in it!"

And in a second the blade of an ax came through the flimsy woodwork and soon there was a hole large enough for me to squeeze through, and I did it P. D. Q.!

"What the ——'s up?"

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There was a duet of Spanish and good United States as both said—

"Caught in a *camelote*!"

And Cahill added:

"A —— of a big one, and ten million snakes and other varmints on it! Look out of the window!"

I did—and got instantly giddy. Our engines were not running and yet the boat seemed to be sailing around in a circle at all sorts of speeds and the rising sun was doing the same. Yet, as I looked, there was the big dead tree to which we had tied up the night before and beyond it the same stretch of swamp, apparently as dense and immovable and solid as ever. If that were the case, and it seemed to be, what the dickens was the sun doing chasing itself all around the horizon! It looked to me that our astronomers were all wrong and that that old negro preacher was right when he contended that "The sun do move!"

But, at that moment, a breeze caught the morning mist and lifted it, and I saw the river bank on the other side, the clear water in between and realized that we were in or near the center of an enormous mass of swamp stuff which was floating down the river, revolving as it went, and striking first one bank and then the other.

And this mass was what the Argentinos along the river called a *camelote*. Then I knew and realized where our visitors came from! The Lake Ybara morass, a swamp as big as all the New England States, situated just below where the Paraguay and Alto Paraná join to make the Paraná, had the cheerful habit, during the flood season, of pushing off from its river edge acres and acres of tangled water weeds, vines, *llianos*, shrubs and trees and sending them down the Paraná into the broad estuary of the Rio de la Plata, the River of Silver, and thence out into the ocean—a pleasant prospect for us unless some vessel came to our rescue or our host let us loose!

After we had gazed our fill—and it did not take long to do that—the captain said—

"We must go an' rescue the men—the crew."

So we went back to his cabin and yelled up to them, and back came all sorts of prayers in all sorts of languages to do it sudden and swift. I looked for some weapon to clear the deck outside the door and pitched on several of these "soda-water" fire extinguishers which all river boats have to carry.

Cahill opened the door a crack, the captain stood with a machete ready to slice off the head of any uninvited critter and I turned both extinguishers loose along the deck around the door. There were hisses, chatterings, grunts and scratching along the deck as I dispensed the novel, sparkling and hissing beverage. A glance through the crack showed no snakes or other things, we opened it wide, the captain shouted to the roofers and they came off their roost through the door and into the cabin in one single, sinuous curve. Evidently they had watched the gyrations of the snakes below them until they had caught the exact motion.

FIRST we had an "experience meeting." That of myself and Cahill was the same. The captain had been wakened by the crew on top of his cabin, had rushed to the door and opened it, had been met by two scared-to-death little monkeys who jumped him and clung around his neck, chattering and screaming for dear life. Also, just outside the door was a big fer-de-lance raising itself for its deadly stroke!

The captain tore off the monkeys, threw them at the snake, closed and bolted the door, snatched a fire-ax from its hook and cut his way into Cahill's cabin and then into mine—so that we could all be together. The crew, Portuguese, Guarini-Mestizas and one Italian, told their tale together, and I realized then how it sounded at the Tower of Babel when the "confusion of tongues" was put on the builders.

The captain was used to being an interpreter and straightened the various tales into one.

The crew had been sound asleep on the lower deck with all doors open. Of a sudden they had found their quarters invested and infested by a combined crawling, creeping, sliding and jumping menagerie, had forsaken bunks and blankets in haste and, with just what they had on, had climbed to the upper deck, had been followed by some of the visitors up the stairs and had then taken to the roof of the cabins.

"No hope for breakfast or coffee, is there, Captain?" said Cahill when all experiences were in.

The captain looked at Luigi, the Italian

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cook, and the look produced a cataract of Neapolitan objections to being stung, bitten clawed or gnawed to death, and it only stopped when the captain said:

"I fear not, señor! I would order-r-r no man to hiss death for-r-r a br-r-reakfast!"

So that was that!

Then I remembered that in a locker in the captain's cabin he kept some stores.

"Anything in that locker that is eatable, Captain?"

He turned the contents loose and they did not seem appetizing. Two bags of naval captain's biscuit, a near relative of the old army hardtack, much harder and tougher, and smelling mouldy; some cans of sardines, two cans of plum pudding and a large glass jar of preserved plums. It did not look like a balanced ration but it was all there was and, by the aid of the ax, we opened the cans and jar and set to.

Water there was none on the upper deck, and between us and that in the river there might be several deaths! The captain produced a jug of *caña*—native rum, one hundred-proof. From its after effects on me, I did not blame him for keeping it in a stone jug. I am sure that not even metal or glass would not be eaten into holes by it, just give it time.

"I have an idea, Captain," said Cahill suddenly. "Isn't the kitchen right under this cabin?"

"It eesse, señor."

"Hand me that ax."

In a minute Cahill had hacked a hole through the middle of the floor and was peering down through it.

"Gosh! What a fine collection of specimens. Wish I had them where I could skin them! Got any gunpowder up here, Captain?"

"Caneester fool behind you, señor."

"Any paper or cloth?"

"Take the sheet from my bed, señor."

For the captain had an idea of that which Cahill was going to do. With strips torn from the dirty sheet and gunpowder dampened with the Captain's fire-water, Cahill deftly fashioned a slow burning stinker, just such as country boys use to smoke woodchucks, gophers, squirrels and bumble-bees out of their holes, or to suffocate them.

While he was doing this, I took a peep through the hole into the kitchen, and the floor was a mass of wriggling, spitting, snarling varmints, and I did not blame the crew for leaving their quarters and looking not upon the order of their going. Evidently, when the *camelote* launched itself and curled lovingly around us and started off on its voyage to the Atlantic Ocean, its population got panicky, the oldest inhabitant had no memories of such a proceeding as having his domicile skip out into the middle of the river and commence to waltz. Our boat, stuck out like a sore thumb in the middle of the patch, they felt certain that we were either the cause of the matter or that we were a providentially sent place of refuge, and they had crawled, wriggled, hopped, squirmed, slithered, run, jumped and flew to it and were ready to meet us and argue the matter with claw, beak, teeth or fang.

A most horrible stench broke into my meditations. Cahill had finished his stinker and had lighted it to see if it worked properly. It did. We gasped, sneezed and choked while he lowered it down the hole, fastened the end of it to the floor and covered the opening with the mattress from the Captain's cot.

"There! If that blend of gunpowder, hundred per cent. proof rotgut and your sheet doesn't send those folks kiting, then I give up!"

The captain showed his white teeth under his big walrus moustache and said:

"Eeef dthe *caña* and dthe powder-r-r does not make dthem to go, dthat sheet he feeneesh eet! I leave my home in Santa Anna. Eet iss on dthe Paranáhibá hwhich ees dthe top of dthe Alto Paraná. I haf not hat heem washed seence. I haf not hat time!"

"How long ago was that, Captain?"

The captain figured up on his fingers and gravely answered—

"Eet iss per-haps seex mont's."

And Cahill turned to me and whispered—

"We ought to be arrested for cruelty to animals!"

While the stinker was getting in its work, all hands stared out of the little windows. It was like sitting on the revolving box and looking through the slit in it at the scenery painted on the enormous circular walls of one of those old cycloramas which used to amuse and instruct our grandparents.

Our estate, in its travels on the big, swollen river, slowly revolved, sometimes striking a bank and slowing, stopping its motion or reversing it. At times we would seem to be going upstream, at others we

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were racing towards Buenos Aires and breaking all river traffic speed regulations. Cahill broke the silence—

"I suppose, Captain, that unless this thing breaks up of itself, our only hope is to be taken off by another boat?" The captain's reply was in Spanish, which Cahill translated to me:

"Little hope of that, señor! They will see that we have small boats and also that we have many snakes, fer-de-lance, coral-snake, pythons! So they will not meddle with us. They will pass us by!"

"But a big boat could push in here and take us off?"

For answer, the captain pointed down the river and we caught a glimpse of a large steamer coming around a bend towards us. The *camelote* revolved, and we lost sight of the boat for a minute. When it came in view again, it was disappearing round the bend, and black smoke was coming from its funnel. I swore a good, round swear at the captain of that boat, but our captain excused him to me in his painful attempt at English.

"Won time I come up Paraná on beeg boat same ass dthat. Beeg *camelote* he come down. Mate he tell captain 'Better gif *camelote* plenty room!' Captain he new to Paraná, nev-ver see *camelote* bee-for'. He say 'To —— wiz *camelotel*' He pull jingle-jingle, fool speed ahead, an' steer stra-eet for *camelote*. *Camelote* say *swish* an' suck boat in leetle way. Dthen eet say *whoof*, *swish*, an' speet boat out, most turn him over, an' go on!"

And the captain pantomimed the whole thing in full Spanish style, with bowings and wavings and imitations of the *whoof*, *swish* and the "speet out" and he added a moral to his tale—

"That captain he gif nex' *camelote* plenty river-room!"

And I was fully convinced.

JUST then there was a *fizz*, and the aroma of Cahill's fuse was spread around us once more. It had burned itself clean to its end at the floor, and was treating us to a taste of what it had given the kitchen folks. We stamped it out and re-covered the hole with the mattress and set two of the crew to sit on it so as to make the hole stink-proof.

"We'll have to let the wind blow some of that whiff out of the kitchen before we do anything else," said Cahill. "Let's watch our little yacht gambol along. It's quite interesting."

We were now in a crookeder and narrower portion of the river, and approaching another of those little custom houses which dot the Paraná and the Alto Paraná clean up to Asuncion and Gran Sala at every landing place, for there is a large amount of smuggling on down-river boats from Brazil, Paraguay and even from Bolivia, and the duties on certain things are very heavy.

The one we were approaching was a typical one, a neat little white-washed or yellow-washed building, perched on the edge of the bank with its wharf or landing stage below it, projecting out a little way into deeper water. Lounging around it were the usual group of customs officials in their gaudy uniforms and, as we appeared around the bend, they gave us a long look. There was a hustling of some of them from the landing stage and *camelote* waltzed and we lost sight of them. We felt our host strike the shore and caught a glimpse of the place as we passed below. There was not a vestige of the landing stage, and the little house hung over the bank in the attitude of one looking for a lost article and saying:

"Good gracious! Where did my wharf go to?"

"Clean sweep," was Cahill's comment. "Wish this thing would hit these banks harder and knock off some of its edges. We might get a chance to go free! But I guess that scent bottle of mine is about cleared out down there. You fellows make that hole bigger. I'm going down to close the doors and get me a drink of water. The captain's hooch is burning holes in my tripe!"

But the captain intervened:

"Señor Cahill," in very sonorous Spanish, "it is the duty of the captain of a vessel to take the lead in all places of danger. I can not let my passengers, my friends, take risks while I, the captain, stand by idle."

And he made a very low bow to Cahill and me with his hand placed on his chest. I didn't understand Spanish very well at that time, but I knew from the grandiloquent tone that he wanted to play first.

Cahill replied in kind, in equally polite Spanish, so we draped the rest of the sheet about the captain's nose and mouth, tied a rope around his waist and lowered him through the hole, up through, which came softened but still recognizable whiffs of

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Cahill's blend. We heard the slamming of doors and windows, there was a jerk on the rope, and we pulled the captain up.

"Pretty whiffy down there yet, isn't it?"

The captain wiped his watering eyes and let out a gasp of relief:

"*Madre de Dios*, señor, eef snake not dead, nossing keel heem!"

"Where's the water, Captain?"

"Pardon, señor! I forgot the water. That —that steenkare of yours was all that I could think of! I will return and bring it—with my thousand apologies for my forgetfulness!"

All this in Spanish and with many low bows.

" 'Deed you won't. Harry, give me one of those Skunkadora Perfectos of yours. They'll help to kill that smell."

"I handed him one of my maligned cigars. He lighted it. We lowered him and soon heard a gurgling noise, then an exclamation—

"Great scott, but that feels good!"

Another long sucking gurgle and then—

"Haul her up, Harry, and put out that blaze inside you!"

I hauled, and up came the big, iron boiling-pot with its heavy iron cover tight on it. Evidently, from Cahill's drinking out of it, the critters had not taken any baths in it, so I took off the cover and plunged my face in it and drank, for I really was burning up inside. It had a greasy scum on top, it tasted of garlic and peppers and it left a twang of boiled cabbage in the mouth, but it was fairly cool and it felt delicious as it descended and quenched the rum.

I looked down the hole, and Cahill was bustling about the stove. Soon he gave the "haul up." He was coughing and red-eyed, but smiling as ever.

"Lit a fire in the stove and it's burning fine. Put on all the pots and kettles I could find, We'll try boiling water on this reptile collection presently. Give me that pot again. I'm still warm inside."

"But, signor," interrupted Luigi, the cook, in Italo-Spanish, "there is plenty of good, sweet, drinking-water in that tank behind the stove."

"Hully gee! And I filled myself full of that bilge-pot water! And I was going to drink that water from the pump in the kitchen, but it came up chock full of bugs and wigglers!"

"That is the river water, signor. We don't drink that. It is often full of fever."

"And you let me drink that pot-liquor and run the risk of the river water? Well, for that you go right into that hole and make some coffee and cook some chuck. *Pronto!*"

"But, signor, the snakes, I have no shoes!"

"No snakes down there now, I trod on a few wriggling, squshy things but nothing bit me! Here—here is an old pair of mine. Now git!"

And that last piece of American language put Luigi through the hole.

"Now, while breakfast is cooking, I'm going up on the cabin roof for to see what I can see!"

I tried to dissuade him from any such attempt, for we could not tell what might not be waiting outside the doors on the deck, but he was bent on doing it, so I decided to go along. Two would be better than one if there was trouble. We kept on our high wading boots, stuck our automatics in our belts and hung a machete in its sheath on the belt, cracked the door open, saw and heard nothing. Cahill boosted me up. I pulled him after me, and we gazed around.

IT SURELY was a weird and wonderful sight. Our little *camelote* was acres and acres in extent, a mass of intermixed moss, water-plants, shrubs and trees, laced together with *llianas*, bamboo and the roots of the shrubbery into a perfect mattress. Our boat was much nearer the edge than I had thought, instead of being the polar axis we were sailing in a great circle when the mass revolved. We surely had the right of way on the Paraná. Just as soon as we hove in sight, everything on the river made for the banks and into any shelter it could find, for our craft turned and swung from bank to bank in a most erratic manner. It was only in the long, wide reaches that it traveled straight down.

"Say, Harry, this banging and bumping on these banks ought to put us nearer to the edge every time it happens. We are on the outside now and much heavier than this swamp stuff. I wish we would hit something big and Señor Camelote would say *whoof! swish!* like the one the captain told us about."

But a glance at the long distance from us to the clear water of the river did not give

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me much hope of a releasing *whoof*, *swish* or any other kind of *camelote* language for speeding the parting guest, so I turned my attention to the landscape, or rather our swampscape.

There were few of the critters on the upper deck and these were mostly torn, injured or dying. The rest of them must have got a whiff of Cahill's stinker from below and disapproved of it and left. There were still a lot of crawling things on the lower deck, and the swamp around us was lively with them.

Besides the ten million crawling, hopping and creeping things there were alligators, caymen, wild pigs by the dozen, and I thought that I saw in the distance some yellowish animals of the cat tribe, pumas or such, but we had not brought our field-glasses along and I was not certain.

Clinging to the tops of the scrubby trees were many small monkeys and we could hear their shrill and terrified squealing and chattering. And I don't blame them, for their deadly enemies were on the ground underneath them, just waiting for them to drop into their mouths. In one case we saw a tremendous sinuous body slide up a tree, there was a dart of the big head, and the boa slipped down with something struggling in its coils.

The Indians who inhabit the Ybera and El Chaco swamps tell weird tales—and swear to them by all the saints on their calendar—of boas or pythons fifty feet long, and seem especially fond of telling of a dog-headed serpent varying from fifty to a hundred feet long, according to the size of the imagination of the narrator or the credulity of the hearer, which chases the natives over water, swamp and up trees, tears them to pieces with its teeth and dines on them just so.

Another pleasant habit of this pleasant neighbor is to wind around the wattle-built huts of the Swamp Indians, crush them in and dine at leisure on the whole family. To say nothing of moles as big as pigs, pigs as big as tigers and equally ferocious, man-eating flying lizards twenty feet long. The tales run on to the supernatural, such as ghosts with feet turned backward, ghosts with fronts but no backs, ghosts who carry their heads under their arms—and the worst of these gentlemen is that a single sight of them is sudden death. Nice place to live in!

But all these must have slept late that morning and "missed their boat," for we could not see a thing that looked like them, and I did not grieve at their absence. I'm sure that if I had actually seen any one of the whole lot I would have hastened to the captain's rum jug and finished the quart or two left in it, which would have meant two finishes, the jug and me.

"I've seen all I want to," said Cahill at length. "Let's go down and have a confab with the captain. We must get out of this thing in some way!" he turned toward the location of the cabin door, stopped and said, "Good lord! Look at that!"

I turned quickly, and there, just rearing itself over the edge of the roof and barring our way to the door, was the largest snake head I ever saw or want to see! It was bigger than the head of a big dog, its eyes were fixed on us and the flickering, forked tongue played around its mouth like small lightning flashes. As we looked a yard of two of its body rose with the head, a body seemingly as big as mine. Both of us fired at the fearsome head simultaneously. It dropped instantly, and the threshing of the huge body against the cabins and the deck shook them and resounded all over the boat. Cahill and I waited a few seconds and then crept on hands and knees, pistols in hand, and finally peered over the edge of the roof.

From there we could see that our soft-nosed bullets had made a badly torn head, so we sent the rest of our loads into the twirling, squirming coils and watched the death agony of a monster big enough and strong enough to have taken the largest bull in its coils and crushed it into a pulp. A coil fell over the edge of the deck, another followed it and the whole body rolled down to the lower deck and squirmed itself off that on to the swamp-ground.

At sight of its coming, almost everything alive took to flight. They knew their master and his power, and put distance between them. The only exceptions to these were the wild pigs, called *jacalas* by the captain. They were long, lanky, tusked animals beside which our Southern piney-woods rooters would look like well-fed Berkshires. A bunch of these, feeding some distance away, saw the fall of the snake and, without waiting a second, they put for it and commenced to tear at the big body ravenously. To the twistings and throes of the dying body they paid little attention. They hung on until they had torn through the

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scales and skin and through the flesh and then gorged themselves on the entrails and other interior organs. It was a sickening sight. We stood it for a minute or two and then dropped off the roof and through the door and Cahill's first remark showed the born and trained naturalist.

"What a shame that skin is spoiled! What a specimen it would have made for my museum! Why, Harry, that is by far the largest python I ever saw or heard of! Where do you suppose the reptile had been hiding that we did not see him before?"

"I don't know and I don't care, now! All I know is that it is dead and being torn to pieces by those snouty brutes. It will be a long time before I get over the feeling of seeing that infernal triangular head peering at us over the edge of the roof with that whipping tongue, flickering in and out as if it were already tasting one or the other or both of us! And the horrible turmoil of that struggling mass of muscles. Bah! I never want to see another sight like that! Darn it, I feel as if I never wanted to see a fish-worm again, or anything else that wriggles!"

And all the sympathy that I got from Cahill was the regretful remark—

"I don't believe that I'll ever make a naturalist out of you!"

WE, OR rather he, went into conference with the captain at once, sitting around an improvised table in his cabin whereon we found good hot, cooked food and a potful of coffee, not the bitter, astringent product of half-scorched bean-coffee which we drink in this country, but Brazilian coffee of the finest, made as it is only made in South America—a delicate, dark-straw color, clear and limpid, delightfully aromatic, soothing, refreshing, uncontaminated by cream or milk, very slightly sweetened. I felt myself a new man after a cup or two of it.

The conversation was in rapid Spanish, which I could not follow, and so dropped out of the conversation, for it would have taken an hour if the captain had tried to put it into what he called "Americain" for my benefit. Cahill interpreted it to me afterwards, and the gist of it was this:

"The captain is pretty well worried over the matter. He thinks that no boat will try to aid us; he has already given us good reasons why. He is not worried over the animal part of it but he is afraid that the boat may get injured or that—and this has happened in the past—that we may be carried out to sea or, if we strand on some of those mud-flats below the mouth of the Uruguay river in the La Plata, that, with the river in the swollen state it is now, we would be wrecked there and be in great peril of our lives. We can't do a thing to help in getting the boat out. The wheel is all tangled up with swamp stuff so that it can not turn a paddle.

"Now there's two or three things we can try. One is for us two to take one of those small boats, get the crew to help us drag it to the edge of the *camelote* and we can go ashore by ourselves and let the captain and crew do the best they can.

"Not to be thought of for a minute, Cahill! The captain's a good old scout. He is in this fix because he obliged us when not another boat would think of going into that —— swamp! No, sirree!"

"Glad you think that way, Harry. I'm with you in that! Now, the next thing is for us and some of the crew to do the same thing in both the boats, take the towing cables with us and get some passing boat to try to pull us out."

"Sounds feasible. Why not try it?"

"Look how she lies, broadside on to the water and a hundred feet away from the edge. No way but to try and pull her sidewise, and built as she is—flimsy as all these smaller boats—she'd likely pull in two before they were able to start her free."

"Well, what's the next little consoling idea?"

"Let things run along as they are until we get to Paraná or Rosario and I think that we may get some help there if we can send word ahead by some darned boat which will come near enough for us to wigwag them. I know their code down here and the captain has the flags."

"I vote for that."

"Yes, but here comes in another trouble: The captain says we are somewhere between Esquina and La Paz, near to the Big Bends of the river. We came upon them night before last so you did not see them. The river makes a turn almost at right angles and runs for a while due east, then it turns again sharp to the south and the captain says, and I know, that in freshet times like these there are whirlpools there

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which even the bigger up-river boats try to steer clear of."

"Think that Señor Camelote, Señor Boat and Señors Captain, Crew and Passengers Two may all get mixed up and get drowned together, eh?"

"A possibility. But the captain is willing to try it and suggests that we get the two small boats on the edge of the lower deck, tie them to opposite stanchions so that they cannot slide off, get into them with our life preservers on and, if things come to the worst, cut the binding ropes, let the boats slide off and do all we can to keep afloat in them!"

"Sort of Hobson's choice, isn't it? But it suits me. Tell El Capitan that we're both with him. He knows more about this confounded river than we do. Let him run the thing!"

The captain, when told of our decision, thanked us most strongly in such dreadful travestry of "Americain" that I won't try to tell it. I know that, as Cahill put it, he "blathered us up and slathered us down" as all sorts of brave men and likened us to the *conquistadores*, the old Spanish scoundrels who conquered and plundered South America, and I did not consider it as a compliment even when I thought of the way we had treated our own American Indians in the past.

Well, there was nothing to do but to wait for the Bends, so I drank another cup or two of coffee, smoked several of my Skunkadora Perfectos and watched the banks recede. The critters on the *camelote* had lost my interest. Cahill heard the crew vowing wax candles, *dos covados*, tall and a hand-span around—about four feet high and three or four inches thick—to be burned on the altars of the various patron saints of the various members of the crew if they, the saints, pulled all together and got us safely on land again.

"It won't cost much. These candles are cheap, and it will chirk those fellows up a whole lot if we chip in on this candle matter. What say?"

"Go the limit, double the length and the thickness if you think it will help!"

So Cahill gave them a talk in river lingo. I do not know how large he made the candles but there were bows and hat and cap doffings and cries of "*gracias, señors,*" and we were called "*muy simpatica*" again and again, which, literally translated, means "very sympathetic" but colloquially, with these classes of men, means "bully boy," or, as they say in courts martial, words to that effect.

THE first bend hove in sight at last and I did not like its looks. It had high banks of hard, dirty-looking clay. The water piled itself up against them and swirled and tossed, and there were big circles of dirty foam at the foot of them and logs and other debris circling around in these. We stood in light undress—trousers, low shoes and tight woolen shirts, with a life-belt of cork around each of us—between the boats as they lay moored on deck. We were all to take the boat on the side which tipped down, the captain would cut the mooring rope and let us slide and then it would be devil take the undermost if the boat got submerged in the smother.

Señor Camelote struck the bank full on, was lifted up it—it seemed to me about twenty feet—and slid off and rounded the bend without a break and without doing much more than throwing us off our feet. But when we looked around we found ourselves fully fifty feet nearer the edge, and the bow was pointing straight out to clear water.

"Good! If we have the same luck next time and are on the outside, we will be clear and free. Captain, how about it?"

"The odther bend ees bad-der'an theese won, señor! We are een dthe han's off dthe Saints!"

"Well," remarked Cahill, aside to me, "I hope they have received the news of that ton or so of beeswax, and work accordingly!"

And Luigi, the Italian cook, overhearing this last remark, said in Italian:

"Assuredly they have heard the news, Signors Car-heel and Har-ree! See how easily they pushed the *camelote* off when it was far up the bank!"

"Hope they try just as hard next time and be as successful!" was Cahill's only comment.

In an hour or so we sighted the other bend and it sure looked "bad-der" than the first one. The clay bank was higher and nearly vertical, a sort of hollow had been worn in it just before the shore curved, and in this bend was a sucking, whirling mass of waters, a regular whirlpool a hundred feet across and full of debris, among which we

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saw the remains of some parts of a boat.

We did not have much time to look. We raced toward it rapidly, it seemed, for a few seconds, as if the *camelote* would almost miss it. Then before we could collect our senses or take any action towards the boats, the *camelote* hesitated for an instant, almost stood still and then was flung against the bank, twisted around. Our boat careened until it was almost on its side, the whole party of us were flung overboard as if we were chips.

I found myself sucked under and choking, and then came to my senses, lying on top of the big paddle-wheel with Cahill and all the rest of us tangled up among one another, covered with trash and soaked through with the muddy water. My mouth and eyes were full of it and all the rest were equally choked and gasping. Then I heard Cahill's voice:

"Free! Free! Harry, we're free and safe! Glory be to those Saints! I'll send them all a special candle for myself!"

It was true. We were out in the clear water, or near the middle of the river, with only a garden-patch of swamp clinging to our paddle-wheel behind, our Mother Camelote was sailing down the river a few hundred yards ahead of us little the worse for the experience, as the gap the boat tore in her as she "speet us out" was closing up as she revolved.

Tagging along behind it were our two small boats, their ropes having been caught in the tangled stuff, and we thanked our stars that we had not had time to get into them. We untangled ourselves from one another and the smother of weeds and vines, felt ourselves over for damages and discovered no broken bones, but lots of bruises, cuts and strains—nothing so serious that arnica and salve would not fix.

The next thing was the boat and its machinery. All hands except the engineer went to clearing the paddle-wheel with axes, machetes and boathooks. The engineer and fireman started the boiler into steam, and reported only a leak or two in the piping. The engines turned over correctly. They rocked the wheel backward and forward, and it was soon free of the weeds and stuff, and behold us sailing under our own steam, quietly slipping slowly down the river and hunting for a big, solid clay bank in some quiet cove where no *camelote* could touch us. We soon lost sight of our hostess.

I am sure now, from her capricious ways, that that was a lady Camelote—and we let her go on her way. Who were we that we should again intrude on her? Not us! We had all the time there was between us and Rosario where we had chartered the boat, for Cahill had given up all idea of trying the Ybera again and, as for me, a million a minute and all my expenses paid, wouldn't tempt me into any South American swamps again! Even saying that all the dog-heads and flying lizards and ghosts with queer habits were simply in the minds of the Indians, there were enough other things to make a timid man like myself say to Cahill when he sounded me out for another such trip:

"No! *Non!* Nix! *Nein!* Nay! Not by a —— site, nor a swampsite! Too much is enough"!

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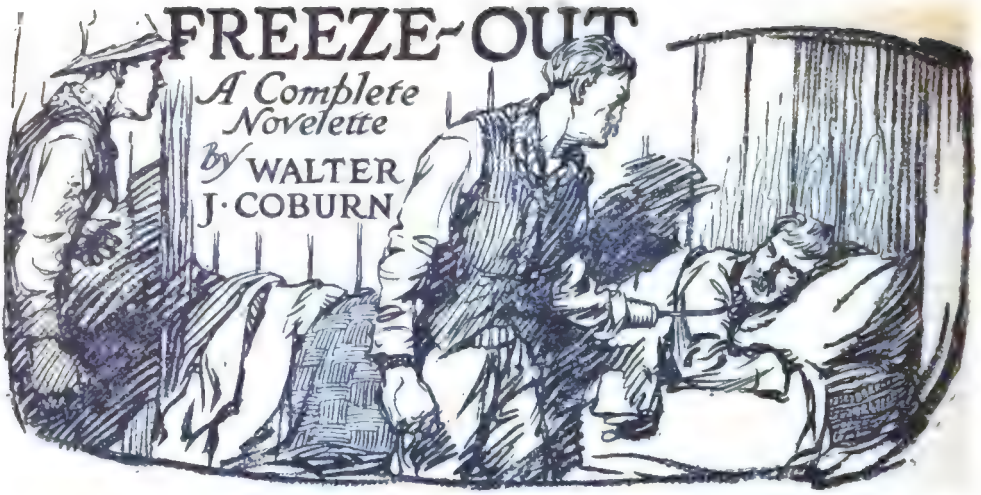

Author of "Paid Off," "Deuce High," etc.

WITH the exception of the "Kid," every man of the seven in the cabin had killed a human being. Again, except for the Kid, there was a price offered for the capture, dead or alive, of each of them.

Knowing this, the Kid felt certain that he read contempt in the glances the others bestowed upon him. "Silver Tip" Talbert, the leader of the outlaw pack, was the only man there who treated him as one of them. There was ten thousand in bounty on Silver Tip's white haired scalp, a sum that more than doubled the total of lesser rewards out for the others.

"Squint" Hudson, "Heavy" Harris and "Wingy" Smith each boasted of a thousand apiece which would be paid over for them, standing or feet first.

Jude Carter and Chappo, the Mexican, would each bring five hundred on the hoof, or "laid on the block."

The Kid, but one week old in the life of crime, was as yet unknown by name or description to the authorities. Since joining the outlaw band, no man save those who called Talbert their chief had seen the Kid's face, by light of day or moonlight.

Newspaper accounts of the train holdup a few miles east of Chinook, Montana, spoke vaguely of an unseen man who had remained in hiding behind the willows, guarding the saddle horses of his companions who had blown up the safe in the express car and vanished with two hundred thousand dollars in bank notes, gold, and negotiable bonds. Save for that vague hint of notoriety, the Kid was an unknown factor in the most daring and successful train robbery Montana had known in years.

All papers and law officers agreed promptly that Silver Tip Talbert was the brains of the gang. Who the others were, they did not know for certain, but by checking up carefully, seasoned sheriffs decided that Squint, Heavy, and Wingy had joined once more with their old leader. Of Chappo and Jude, they were less certain, for these two had drifted north from New Mexico and Arizona and were not so well known.

They had left behind them one dead outlaw. He was identified as "Black" Andy Sloan, an escaped convict. Black Andy had been shot twice. The .30-.40 bullet in his groin had been fired by an express messenger. Who had pulled the trigger of the .45 that sent its slug between the wounded man's eyes, no one of the law officers could know.

"The rifle bullet ketched him fust," announced Pete Waters, the sheriff from Chinook, who had run up to the scene on a special train. "See where he crawled, a-bleedin', towards the brush? Looks tuh me like one uh his friends finished him. Range so clost it powder burnt Andy's face. Reckon they figgered he was too bad hurt tuh ride an' they was skeered he'd run off at the head if he was captured."

"Talbert done it?" asked a deputy.

"Not by a —— sight. Silver Tip ain't that cold-blooded. He does his powder

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burnin' square an' open, does Silver. Hudson er Harris er Wingy Smith mighta done it, but not Talbert. Damn this blizzard! Done blotted out their trail, plumb. Talbert waited fer this storm a-purpose. They're sittin' purty down yonder somewheres in the bad lands along the Missouri River by now, splittin' the loot. Git the boys together an' we'll hit their trail. We gotta make a showin' but we won't never see hide ner hair of 'em. By now, there's snow in the brakes that's belly deep to a tall camel. Gosh, that wind cuts plumb through a man's hide into the bone, an' the missus done fergot tuh sew them two buttons on to my coonskin."

The grizzled old sheriff knew whereof he spoke. The bad lands were covered by a blanket of white snow, drifted ridge deep across the coulées. The long winter had begun. All of which was in exact accordance with the carefully laid plans of Silver Tip Talbert. Lost in the deep cañon among the buck brush and scrub pines, their cabin was safely hidden from prying eyes.

From the pinnacles on either side, the men on guard with powerful field-glasses commanded a view of approaching riders. Until the spring Chinook winds turned those drifts into raging torrents, the outlaws were safe. Talbert had done his planning well and with the wisdom that comes of years of being hunted like an animal. One fact, only, escaped his reckoning. The fact that seven men were to be cooped up in the cabin during the winter months when the days were short and the nights long.

One other thing that the outlaw leader had not counted on was the bullet hole in his left thigh. Now, as he lay on his bunk, his cold blue eyes flitting from one bearded face to the next, he was bothered by a foreboding of disaster. An uncanny judge of human nature, he read signs in those faces that were disquieting to his peace of mind. Only when his gaze dwelt on the unbearded face of the Kid, did the lines between his bushy white brows grow less defined.

The Kid squatted near the little sheet iron stove, peeling potatoes for the evening meal. The others sat or lay on their beds spread out on the dirt floor, idling away the time until supper was ready.

Talbert shoved his hand under the soiled pillow where his .45 lay.

"One uh you boys might give the Kid a hand with supper," he suggested in his deep-toned, drawling voice. "Since we hit camp, he's done all the cookin', dish washin' and wood splittin'."

"Why the —— shouldn't he?" growled Squint, lifting his eyes from the pages of a thick mail-order catalog known in the West as The Sheep Herder's Bible. "He never done nothin' but take keer uh the hosses while we run all the risk."

"Which," returned Talbert, his voice losing none of its calm, "was accordin' to agreement. 'Twan't the Kid's idee that he tend the ponies."

Wingy Smith, fitting an ugly-looking steel hook into a wooden butt that fitted to his left arm which was amputated below the elbow, looked quickly from Squint to the wounded leader. What he read in the eyes of the two men caused his lips to thin into a straight slash that made his square jaw jut out on a line with the blunt end of his broken nose.

"Silver's right," he growled. "We're lettin' the Kid do all the work. We'd orter take turns helpin'."

"When did you buy chips in this game?" snapped Squint, his cross-eyes shifting to the one-armed man.

"I set in from the start, Squint. And while I got my mouth open, lemme tell yuh suthin'. If yuh pull that gun yo're a-edgin' fer, I'll snag the kidneys plumb outa yuh."

HOLDING the wooden butt in his right hand he made a quick, twisting movement that brought the sharp steel point of the hook upward in a suggestive gesture. Five or six feet separated the two and Wingy Smith had the reputation of being agile as a cat on his feet.

Squint, with difficulty, repressed a desire to squirm. Heavy Harris, his giant frame sprawled on his bed across the room, grinned widely and hit a dirt-filled box with a stream of tobacco juice.

"Have at it, cowboys," he urged. "Mebbeso one of yuh'll git his needin's, then we'll split his share uh the dough among us that's left."

Chappo's black eyes met Jude Carter's in a quick, meaning glance. One corner of Jude's loose mouth lifted in a mirthless smile. It was as if some secret understanding existed between the Mexican and the renegade from the Arizona border.

Silver Tip Talbert, lying on his bunk, saw

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the look in Jude's pale eyes and wondered.

"Dunno as it's wuth all this janglin', boys," he said. "Looks like we was rowin' over trifles. Mind, she's gonna be a long winter an' if we don't git on, we're the losers. Squint, lend the Kid a hand. Wingy'll git breakfast, Heavy'll split the wood. Jude, you an' Chappo kin rustle dinner an' supper tomorrow night. We'll let the Kid take the twenty-two and bring in a deer while he's restin' tomorrow. Kin yuh kill a blacktail with the little rifle, yuh think?"

"Reckon so, chief," smiled the Kid. "But I ain't kickin' none about doin' the cookin'. You boys done took the chances, like Squint says, while I set back and held the ponies. When it comes right down to it, I didn't earn my split uh the money like you fellers."

"Somebody had tuh hold the bridle reins," said Wingy. "It fell to you. Nobody but Squint is kickin' and he's so ornary he can't git along with hisse'f. That's why they kept him in solitary at San Quentin when he done his hitch there. Turn them spuds over to him, Kid, and come on over here while I learn yuh that card trick I was tellin' yuh about this mornin'. Git on yore legs, Squint, an' skin them Irish lemons."

The Kid looked at the chief who nodded his approval. Squint, glowering and sullen, took up the task of preparing supper.

Chappo's slim hand left the handle of a concealed knife and lifted to twist an end of a thin moustache. There was a hint of disappointment in the covert glance that passed between him and Jude.

Heavy produced a battered harmonica, blew the dust and particles of tobacco from it, and cupping it in his huge paws, coaxed a wailing, wheezy tune from its innards.

"Feel the itch in my off hoof, Kid," announced Wingy, slipping to his feet. "Give us 'Hell Among the Yearlin's,' Heavy, an' I'll git the kinks outa my legs."

Followed fifteen minutes of the cleverest jigging the Kid had ever seen. Jigging that would have won the owner of the nimble feet a fat salary on the vaudeville stage. He wound up by kicking the short butt cigaret from between the young outlaw's straight lips. This brought a general laugh that put even Squint in a good humor.

"Gosh!" gasped the Kid. "And I'm a head taller'n him! Never even grazed my nose! Gosh!"

"Them same feet has won more'n one scrap," grinned Heavy. "Mind the time yuh laid that stock inspector out at the X wagon, Wingy? In the old days before we quit punchin' cows tuh become millionaires at this game?"

"Ary man that'll use a spade bit on a tender-mouthed hoss, and jerk the hoss around the way that inspector done, had it comin', Heavy. I shoulda kicked him afore he busted this here nose, though. It's done sp'iled me fer parlor work, this beak. I mighta married some rich widder woman with a cow ranch, only fer this flat smeller. Now lookit what I done come tuh! A six-bit outlaw with a filed down hoss rasp fer a hand. Who in —— wants tuh set in the moonlight and hold a hook an' look into a face like mine?

"The cards is stacked ag'in' me, gents. I knows uh only one human that's wuss off fer looks, an' that's Squint. When his mammy looked into them come-together eyes, she gives one bawl an' calls fer a fresh deal. Squint's turned loose tuh graze fer hisse'f, which he does. He waddles forth tuh graze on rattle weed, greasewood an' loco which gives him a disposition meaner'n snake p'izen. Twict in ten years I've had tuh drag it outa him an' then git drunk with him an' listen to him tell how he was kicked outa home when he was five days old and walked forty miles afoot to the J-Cross cow camp where they put him tuh wranglin' hosses. Five days old, mind yuh, er was it six, Squint?"

"'Leven years, yuh one-winged, chatterin' magpie," growled Squint, mixing biscuit dough. Wingy's banter seemed to have put the cross-eyed outlaw in a better humor. "Silver Tip was wagon boss at the time an' kin prove it."

"Was you white-headed then, Silver?" asked Heavy.

"I hadn't done ten years, mostly solitary then, Heavy," said Talbert quietly. "No, my mane was black then."

"Black as a crow's wing," put in Squint, pausing in his bread making to smile reminiscently. "And with them blue eyes uh his'n, he was as han'some and upstandin' young buck as ever courted a school-marm. No wonder the purtiest gal in Texas takes him fer better an' wuss an' the J-Cross lays off two days on the fall work tuh sober up from the weddin' licker. The swellest weddin' that ever—"

"Quit it!" Talbert's words popped like pistol shots.

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The Kid's sympathetic smile vanished as he saw the white haired chief sit up on his bunk, white about the lips, blue eyes blurred as if seared by a blow-torch.

"——!" muttered Squint, and bent to his work, stirring vigorously at the biscuit dough. "I fergot, Talbert!"

"Don't fergit no more," said Silver Tip in a husky voice, and relaxed on his bunk to lie on his back, staring dully into space.

"Play somethin'," commanded Wingy in a hoarse whisper, his lips close to Heavy's ear. "Fer ——'s sake, yuh ox, make music!"

With a startled, off-key wheeze, the harmonica gave forth the notes of "Sam Bass." Wingy lifted a nasal voice in accompaniment. The Kid joined in the second verse and as his clear baritone blotted out Wingy's voice, the one-armed outlaw paused to listened.

Verse after verse of the old trail song filled the cabin. No man present had ever heard such a voice, not even on phonographs. It did something to them that they did not understand. When the words of the last verse had trailed off into silence, no one spoke. All were looking at the Kid with a new expression in their eyes. Talbert was the first to speak.

"Could yuh recollect the words uh the 'Lament,' Kid?" he asked gently.

"I'll give 'er a try, chief," grinned the Kid, flushing under the gaze of the men who looked at him so strangely.

"As I walked down the streets of Laredo,
As I walked out in Laredo one day,
I spied a poor cowboy wrapped up in white linen,
Wrapped up in white linen as cold as the clay."

THE KID'S voice, flexible and rich, rose and fell in the plaintive tune of that old song that has been sung at night in every cow-camp from Canada to Mexico. Written by some versatile cow-hand, fitted to its dragging, weird noted music, it is the embodiment of the souls of those who follow the dim trails. It tells of the white-haired mother at home, the sister who waits. Of card games and drinking, of roses and guns. The death song of a cow-puncher.

"Then swing your rope slowly, and rattle your spurs lowly,
And give a wild whoop as you bear me along;
And in the grave throw me, and roll the sod o'er me,
For I'm a wild cowboy and I know I done wrong."

In the silence that followed no man met the gaze of another. Talbert's face was to the wall. Heavy spat at the box and missed it by two feet. Wingy stood by the window, staring out into the dusk. Chappo and Jude lay on their bunks, staring into space.

"Why in ——," growled Squint, wiping a flour-coated hand across his eyes, "didn't yuh say yuh could sing like that, Kid? Now don't go dabbin' into that dish water no more. Yuh might ketch a cold an' plumb rust yore voice. Danged if I wasn't clost tuh bawlin'. Kinda made me feel like I was laying spread out with my hands folded over my belly an' the parson sayin' words to the folks that gathered 'round tuh view the remains. Wingy's lookin' like a mammyless calf at a roundup and I seen Heavy swaller a chaw that'd choke a cow. Give us the one about the hoss with the setfast on his back, will yuh, Kid, an' I'll take yore shift at cookin' next time yo're stuck fer it."

If Squint Hudson had been the one most visibly moved by the Kid's song, it was also Squint who had been the first to recover from any sentiment that might have softened his heart.

Silver Tip Talbert, aware of the shallow depths of Squint's crime-burdened soul, smiled thinly. He was recalling Heavy's remark about splitting among the remaining men, the money of any of the band who was so unfortunate as to be killed. By virtue of his quickness with a gun, coupled with a remarkable personality, Talbert was leader. Let that gun hand slow up or that personality lessen, and these men, with the possible exception of the Kid, would be like so many caged beasts.

There was two hundred thousand dollars in that cabin. Money that every man present had staked his life to steal. They held life cheap, these renegades. Their ultimate goal was South America where they could gamble and drink to their hearts' content. No law, God- or man-made, ruled their lives. Two hundred thousand dollars!

Talbert's musings drifted to another channel. Black Andy, lying face upward on the snow, a round black hole between his glazed eyes. Talbert had been in the Pullman car quieting the panic stricken passengers when Andy's life was snuffed out. On the way to the brush, he had paused to stare into the dead man's face and the powder marks had revealed the manner of Andy's passing. The time had not yet

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come to question the men regarding that treacherous shot.

"And the whole —— winter ahead of us!" he told himself. "I wonder how many of us'll be here when spring gits here?"

II

THE following day the Kid brought in a black-tail buck. The tiny hole at the butt of the animal's ear testified as to the accuracy of his aim with the .22. The reason for the small caliberd rifle was that its report could be heard but a short distance. The crash of a bigger gun might attract unwelcome visitors.

During the long evenings, Heavy played his harmonica, Wingy jigged, and the Kid sang. Days lengthened into weeks.

The wound in Silver Tip's thigh seemed to grow more painful. The long ride to the cabin from the scene of the holdup had done its mischief. The frost had bitten deep into the wound, blackening the raw flesh. Now, with the passing days, it remained an ugly, festering sore. It needed the skill of a physician, but the grim-lipped leader shook his head when the Kid suggested that he ride to town and bring one, dead or alive, through the almost impassable drifts, to minister to the wounded man.

"Thanks, Kid. I'll tough it out. A doc means talk back in town. Talk means capture. I'd ruther die than do another ten years. Too —— old now tuh be caged up. I hired fer a tough hand and I plays my string out. Better not tell the boys yuh offered tuh bring a saw-bones. They might act nasty towards yuh. They feels like I do about bringin' one here."

The Kid nodded.

"Figgered they felt thataway. That's why I waited till we was alone. Now set yore teeth, chief, while I cuts away that proud flesh and swabs 'er out with liniment."

When the wound was bandaged and Talbert lay back, a cigaret between his lips, the Kid resumed his task of fleshing and salting a green buck-hide. Talbert watched for some time, then spoke.

"When yuh th'owed in with us, Kid, yuh said yuh wanted tuh travel our route. I never asked yore name, ner where yuh come from ner why yuh wanted tuh quit punchin' cows an' turn wild. I ain't askin' now, if it's gonna hurt yuh none tuh answer. But if it's not hurtin' yuh to answer, I'd kinda like tuh know. Was yuh forced into turnin' bad?"

"No," said the Kid slowly, "I wasn't forced. But I'd worked at punchin' cows since I was old enough tuh set a hoss. My daddy was a cow-hand till a hoss throwed him and broke his neck. I don't recollect my mammy, bein' she up an' died when I was four years old. Well I punched cows fer forty a month, puttin' in long hours an' gettin' nowhere. Same —— thing day after day. Blowin' my pay fer licker an' poker when I hit town. I jest nacherally got plumb sick of it. I got word that you gents was holed up here, so I drawed my time at the Circle Diamond and rode down tuh throw in with yuh-all. I wanted a South America stake an' some fun, that's all. My name is Harvey Long. Born not two hundred miles from here an' never bin outa the State."

"Hmm. How old are yuh, Kid?"

"Twenty-two, come next May."

"Uh-huh. Are yuh still as fond uh this outlaw life as yuh was the day yuh come?"

Talbert was smiling, his blue eyes fixed on the boy's face. The Kid flushed and did not reply for some moments.

"Yuh want a straight answer, chief?"

"I'd like it, yeah."

"Then yuh get it. I got a bellyfull uh the game right now. I figgered it'd be kinda different. If the rest uh the boys was like you, mebbeso I'd think different. But they ain't. Ary one uh them'd cut his mother's throat fer six bits Mex. My lil ol' forty-a-month job'd look good right now if it wan't too late tuh take it. But I gotta go on through now. I gotta play my hand out. I reckon yuh figger I'm yaller tuh want tuh go back punchin' cows."

"No, not exactly, Kid. If I had every cent uh the two hundred thousand, I'd give it all fer the chance tuh work the rest uh my life with a cow outfit, jest fer my grub. That's the way I feel about it. Fer years, I bin dodgin' like a —— coyote. I've wore stripes an' lived in solitary fer months without talkin' to a human. I've shared my blankets an' split my smokin' with gents like Squint and Wingy that'd quit me in a tight. Folks on the outside talks about honor amongst thieves. Mebbeso there is, but I never found it. Yuh seen what Black Andy got? If this hole in my leg had been

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a few inches higher, so's I'd have tuh be tied into the saddle tuh make it, I mighta got it like Andy did. I'd like tuh know who fired that shot!"

"Dunno, chief. I couldn't see from the brush."

"Yuh say yuh can't go back. Why not? Nobody seen yuh. Yo're sittin' purty, near as I kin figger. Looka here, boy. Come dark, it's yore turn tuh stand guard. Without peepin' tuh nobody, hit the trail. Foller the river tuh Rocky Point and take the stage road tuh Lewiston. Git outa here, savvy?"

"Yuh think I could, chief? Yuh think I could go back?"

"——, yes. I've seen the hankerin' a gnawin' at yore innards. Go on back, marry some purty gal an' go tuh raisin' kids instead uh ——. Yuh don't belong here."

"Sounds purty, chief. But reckon I'll stay."

"What?"

"I'm stayin', Talbert. Fer a while, anyhow, till yore leg heals up good."

"And until we gits —— good and ready tuh turn yuh loose, young 'un!"

Squint Hudson, a leering grin on his bearded lips, shoved his head through the window that the Kid had opened to let in some fresh air. The cross-eyed outlaw had poked the barrel of a carbine through the window and its round muzzle covered the Kid

"Hey, Wingy!" he called, not taking his eyes from Talbert and the Kid, "come here. Bring Heavy along. Our sweet singin' baby is aimin' tuh walk out on us!"

A moment later the three outlaws pushed their way into the cabin.

"I overheered him tell Talbert he 'lowed he'd pull out," sneered Squint. "Nice howdy-do, eh? Him a runnin' around spreadin' the glad news that us boys is holed up here. Go out, will yuh, button? Like —— yuh will, lessen' it's feet first. What'll we do with the —— quitter, boys? How about a necktie party? He horned in where nobody except mebbe Talbert, wanted him. Now he's aimin' tuh drag out his chips. We all agreed tuh wait till spring, then split and every gent fer hisself. Till then we was tuh stick here. Git his gun, Wingy."

"Not while I kin still hold it, he won't!"

The Kid's bloodless lips were twitching and his cheeks had gone white as he backed against the wall. His hand, claw-like, was edging, inch by inch towards the .45 that was shoved in the waistband of his overalls.

Squint's carbine, carelessly held in the crook of his arm, still covered him, its hammer back to full cock. The cross eyes had become slits of greenish light.

Wingy, poised easily on the balls of his feet, crouched for a leap that would sink the ugly hook in the Kid's flesh.

"Looks like you gents was fergettin' who runs this show," drawled Talbert whose right hand was out of sight beneath his pillow. "I'm gittin' you, Squint, if yuh don't drop that gun. *Now!*"

SQUINT hesitated a second, ugly eyes shifting to the leader. Then the carbine muzzle lowered, the hammer was eased to half cock, and the gun clattered to the floor.

"——," grunted Heavy who leaned against the door jamb, .45 swinging idly in his big hand. "What's the row about, anyhow?"

"I was tryin'," said Silver Tip, measuring his words, "to talk the Kid into pullin' out."

"You was?" snapped Wingy, smiling nastily. "What's the idee?"

"He don't belong here, that's all."

"Yo're a —— of a purty specimen tuh be reformin' half-baked kids," sneered Squint. "Yuh made a pet uh this bald-faced yearlin' till we're all plumb sick to our stummicks. He plays his string out with the rest of us, savvy? That goes as she lays an' if it don't lay good, let him argy it out over a gun barrel like a man. Yo're throwin' down us boys that's gone through —— an' high water with you, Talbert, and stickin' up fer a white-livered, gutless idiot that orter be swingin' onto his mammy's apron strings."

"Yeah?" Talbert's voice had lost its customary soft drawl. "Yo're three tuh his one. If yuh think he's yaller, one uh you step outside with him an' shoot it out even. Which uh you tough gents wants tuh try him out?"

"Squint opened the jack-pot," grinned Heavy. "Let 'im play his hand out. As purty a arrangement as any man could ask fer, says I. And six uh us left tuh split the loser's swag."

"Six-guns?" sneered Squint.

"Six-guns," replied the Kid, trying to make his voice steady as he met Squint's gaze.

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"This way out, cowboys," invited Heavy, bowing and holding open the door. "Hands in the air till I gives the word."

Squint and the Kid stepped out into the snow, hands held above their heads. The Kid looked pale, Squint grinned and winked at Heavy.

Heavy pulled off his muskrat cap and held it aloft.

"One uh yuh at each end uh the cabin," announced the self-appointed master of ceremonies. "Watch this cap. When she hits the ground, go fer yore guns. That's the idee, one at each end. Now watch the cap, gents. Ready?"

The cap left Heavy's elevated hand. The right hands of the two contestants flashed downward. A roar from the Kid's gun and Squint spun in his tracks, shot through the right shoulder. He made a frantic effort to draw, but his gun hand hung limp and useless.

"He started fer his gun afore the cap struck the ground," said the Kid through clenched teeth. "I'd orter killed the dirty skunk."

"Well, why the —— don't yuh?" snarled Heavy. "Yuh got five shells left, ain't yuh?"

"He'll wish he had," prophesied Wingy in an undertone. "He's Squint's meat if he don't. Squint ain't bothered with no —— fool notions, eh Heavy?"

"None whatsomever."

Squint was doing his best not to belie their opinions. He had fallen to the ground, cursing in a low monotone, lips bared above his yellow teeth. With his left hand he was covertly groping for the gun that he had managed to dislodge from its scabbard.

The Kid, standing with long legs spread apart, white smoke coming like mist from his gun barrel, watched the fallen man.

His nervous tension had left him and he stood his ground with the steady nerve of a seasoned gun-fighter. The gun in his hand was as steady as the cold light in his gray eyes.

"I'm killin' yuh, Squint, if yuh lift that gun offen the ground," he said evenly.

Squint, his hand a scant three inches from the weapon, paused. Then, mouthing curses, he got on his feet and walked into the cabin.

Chappo and Jude, who had ridden up and seen the duel from start to finish, now rode on to the log stable.

"Bad medicine, that Kid. He shoots neat, Chappo," said Jude in a low tone as he unsaddled his horse.

"*Si.* Ees queeck like those side winder snake, no? Me, I don' like it."

"The —— fool, not to uh killed Squint when he had the chanct."

"The 'eart of those chicken, no?"

"That's his fust shootin' scrape, *compadre.* It'll come easier to 'im next time, mebbe. I hope it'll be that Wingy."

"*Si, si.* Ees too queeck on the foots, that one-handed one. *Madre,* he make me feel bad in the belly las' night when he tweest that 'ook een my shirt an' talk to me about snag thees gizzard out of me. All because I 'old three aces when he 'ave two small pair and ten dollars bet. Son of a gon, Jude, I bet my nex' t'ree han' like a dronk sheep herder, I'm so seeck."

"He's plumb cagy. I bin waitin' fer a pot-shot at 'im, but no go. He rides with his eyes open, blast him. How much we winners at poker?"

"Four t'ousan', now. That Keed ees locky. Santa Maria, thos 'ands he 'old!"

"Wingy took me fer five hundred on them four treys, —— him. Me a-holdin' of the purtiest three aces a man ever got off a cold deck. I couldn't snag the fourth, count uh that fool Heavy stayin' on deuces an' trying' tuh draw out on us. Where Wingy gits that fouth trey, I dunno. I deals him three. Sometimes I think that one-arm pig is onto us. He's wise enough tuh keep his trap shet if he is. I wisht this game was done an' we was outa here. I'm as comfortable as a green hand settin' a bronc. I wisht that fool Kid had snuffed Squint out, hang the luck. Wonder what the scrap was about?"

"*Quien sabe.* Per'aps, my frien', we are not the only one who are play one freeze out game here, no?"

Jude nodded thoughtfully. After a time they went to the cabin. They found Heavy and the Kid bandaging Squint's shoulder. Talbert looked worried.

"Yuh'll wish yuh'd shot straighter," said Squint, as the Kid fastened the bandage. "Yuh won the fust round but this thing ain't over, hear me?"

"Suit yoreself, Squint. I'm ready, any time. But if I was you, I'd bury the hatchet and fergit it."

"The Kid's slug jest tore the muscle," said Heavy hopefully. "Bone ain't even

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nicked. A week an' you boys could take the play up where yuh left off. Between me'n you, Squint, I think the Kid aimed fer the heart an' missed, bein' kinda jumpy. How about it, young 'un?"

There was no mistaking the sneer on Heavy's thick lips, nor the insulting gleam in his pop eyes. The big outlaw was hunting trouble.

The Kid, tying a final knot in the bandage, straightened. He looked very slight and young alongside the giant who stood, thumbs hooked in sagging cartridge belt, looking down at the boy who faced him.

"I ain't a killer, Heavy. Ner do I ever expect to be. I told Silver that I was plumb sick uh this game and I meant it. But I gone too far tuh quit now and I'm playin' my string out. I ain't huntin' trouble, but I ain't takin' no abuse offen you. If yuh think my shootin's bad, step outside. I'll plant the slug between yore horns, Heavy, tuh show yuh I hold my gun steddy. Want it?"

Jude nudged Chappo.

"Told yuh it'd come easier the next time," he whispered. "He'll kill Heavy shore, if they tangle. Lookit the big 'un's eyes shift. He knows he done spoke outa turn. Watch him crawl."

"——, Kid," Heavy passed it over with an uneasy grin, "I was jest funnin'. I might take yuh up, only I like tuh hear yuh warble of an evenin'. It'd be plumb lonesome without yuh."

"What I want tuh know, soon as you idjits gits shet uh them boquets yo're slingin' to an' fro," put in Wingy, "is what started the ruckus. Silver, yuh said it was you that was tellin' the Kid tuh drag it outa here. Why?"

"He's got a belly full uh the game, that's why," said Talbert quietly. "I figgered he'd be better off punchin' cows somewheres."

"An' runnin' off at the head about us boys," added Wingy tartly. "The Kid sticks, whether he's a mind to er not. Yo're captain here, Silver, but us boys has somethin' tuh say about what goes on. We taken our chances with yuh, man tuh man. We got our dough outa the stick-up. Come spring, we scatters into the hills, every gent fer hisself. Till then, every one uh us sticks here."

"That's fair enough, Wingy," agreed the Kid. "I'm stickin', regardless. Now let's quit janglin' and eat. Grub's ready, boys."

That night the Kid sang until nearly midnight. The bloodshot eyes of Squint followed the boy's every movement. Otherwise, the incident of the duel seemed forgotten.

III

DURING the week that followed, the monotony of camp routine was unmarred by any unpleasant happening. By day, two men stood guard on the pinnacles. The Kid brought in another buck, shot in the butt of the ear. Night found all hands except Silver Tip squatted about a blanket, playing poker for high stakes.

On the seventh day, Talbert, alone at the cabin, was startled from his dozing by the crash of a gun shot somewhere up the cañon. The shot echoed in the cañon walls, then was followed by silence.

It was one of the rules of camp that no man should shoot unless there was need of it. The signal of the men on guard, if they saw a posse coming, was three shots at even intervals of five seconds. Talbert, helpless on his bunk, waited in vain for the two following shots. When they did not come he settled back on his pillows, absently fondling his gun, frowning perplexedly.

Followed an hour of impatient waiting during which the old outlaw tried to shake off the uneasy feeling that bothered him.

Then Wingy and Jude rode up and halted outside the door. A moment later Jude entered, bearing the limp body of Squint. Wingy followed at his heels.

"Deader'n a rock, Silver," announced Wingy. "Shot in the back."

"Who done it?" snapped Talbert, nerves rubbed raw from impatient waiting.

"Now yo're askin' a hard 'un," grinned Jude. "Me'n Wingy found him layin' in the snow, plumb dead. We both heered the shot and rode over thataway. Me'n Chappo was on guard when the shot sounded. I leaves the greaser an' rides down the cañon, meetin' up with Wing a quarter of a mile up the draw. We rides on down on a high lope tuh find Squint colder'n a wedge."

"Where was Heavy and the Kid about that time?" asked Silver Tip.

"Heavy was with me," said Wingy. "We was lookin' at some wolf traps we'd set out. I left him skinnin' one that was ketched."

"And the Kid?"

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Wingy shrugged.

"Dunno. We finds this, though, behind the brush patch where Squint's killer laid fer him."

Wingy's steel hook came out of his overcoat pocket, holding a home-made deerskin mitten.

"Know who belongs tuh this, Talbert?" There was a triumphant note in the one armed outlaw's voice as he watched the leader's lips tighten.

"This is the Kid's mitten," admitted Silver slowly. "We all seen him make them mittens.

"You bet," returned Wingy. "Looks plumb like this here Kid had downed Squint from behind. Skeered, I reckon, because Squint's gun arm was healin' fast."

"Mebbe. Mebbe not. I'll ask the boy when he comes in."

"Yuh mean," burst out Jude, "That yuh think the Kid didn't do it?"

"Just that. It ain't like him tuh bushwhack a man he wa'n't afraid of."

"Every man except the Kid has a alibi," growled Wingy.

"Yeah?" Talbert's voice was cold as ice. "What of it?"

"What of it?" Jude's voice rose to a snarling whine. "What of it? —— it, man, it proves the Kid done it, that's all?"

"Mebbeso. Most mebbe not. So far as I'm concerned, Jude, yore word ner yore oath ain't worth a plugged dime. Savvy what I'm drivin' at?"

"Yoh mean —?"

"I mean, hombre, that I don't trust you ner yore greaser pardner outa my sight. Am I speakin' plain enough?"

"I ain't quarrelin' with no wounded man, Talbert."

"My gun arm's in workin' order, Jude, if that's what yo're drivin' at," smiled Talbert easily. "Howdy, Kid, yo're jest in time."

The leader's eyes had left Jude's red face to travel towards the open door where the Kid stood. He was wearing moccasins, and across his shoulder was slung a pair of home-made snow shoes. Since he had come on foot, his approach had been silent as that of an Indian.

"Kid," said Silver Tip. "Let's see yore .45."

The boy nodded and crossing to the bunk, handed his gun, butt first, to the leader.

Talbert sniffed at the muzzle and handed the gun to Wingy.

"Yuh won't find no powder smell in the barrel, Wingy. Yuh mind he cleaned an' oiled the gun jest last night."

Wingy sniffed at the gun barrel, nodded and handed the weapon to Talbert who returned it to its owner.

"Yuh was sayin' this mornin'," Talbert went on in his slow drawl, holding the Kid's level gaze, "that yuh was shy yore mitten. Did yuh find it, Kid?"

"I did not, chief. Pack-rats musta dragged it off durin' the night. Wore my old 'uns today. Why?"

Talbert nodded towards the body of Squint where Jude had laid it on his bed.

"Somebody shot Squint in the back. Wingy found yore mitt in the brush."

"Yuh think I shot a man from behind, chief?" asked the Kid.

The old outlaw shook his head.

"No, Kid. I was jest askin' yuh them questions fer Wingy's benefit. What d'yuh think about the play by this time, Wingy?"

"—— if I know. You and this young 'un is thicker'n two twin niggers. The Kid an' Squint was at odds. Likewise, Squint done told me onct when he was drunk that he had somethin' on you from them days when him and you worked fer the J-Crosses. Yuh both had reason tuh want Squint outa the way. As fer this Jude and the greaser, what 'ud they want tuh kill Squint fer, anyhow?"

"Yeah," added Jude. "We never had nothin' ag'in' the boy."

"No?" Talbert's voice lost none of it's calm. "I ain't so plumb sure uh that, Jude. Yuh mind Black Andy was shot between the eyes by somebody?"

"What the —— yuh drivin' at, Talbert?" asked Wingy. "Andy was my best friend. He was shot by one uh the express messengers, wa'n't he?"

"No. I never told yuh afore because I was waitin' fer somebody tuh let somethin' drop. Whoever killed Andy was standin' over him an' held the gun clost enough tuh powder-burn his face. I allers had a hunch Squint either done it er seen it done. I'm more sure than ever now. Squint Hudson was killed by the same gun that killed Black Andy."

A quick, shifting movement and Wingy was alongside Jude. The ugly steel hook was about Jude's long neck, its sharp point pressing the flesh.

"If I thought you done that tuh Andy," he hissed through snarling lips, "I'd drag

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yore windpipe out, —— yuh! Who done it? Talk fast!"

Jude's face went sickly yellow as the hook sank into his flesh. Wingy's good hand was holding his gun arm in a vise-like pressure, bending in back in an effective hammer-lock.

"I dunno, Wingy," whined Jude. "Afore God, I dunno! Squint and Heavy mighta knowed. I dunno, S' help me!"

WITH a low curse, Wingy flung the shaking Jude across the room. Then he faced Talbert, eyes slits of dangerous light.

"Talbert," he said, breathing like a man after a hard run, "when I said me an' Heavy was together when we heered that shot, I lied. I met him, not two hundred yards from where we finds Squint. I lied because I wanted tuh see this —— Kid git some rough handlin' tuh make up fer the way you take his part. So I lied about it. If Heavy killed Black Andy, he'll pay aplenty fer it.

"If it was that greaser, I'll rip him tuh ribbons. Black Andy done me some good turns off and on. Whoever killed him is gonna taste Wingy Smith's hook! Yo're lyin' about it, Jude, jest as Chappo er Heavy'd lie. But somehow I'll find out who shot my pardner an' he'll die a-squawkin' like a chicken. I dunno who downed Squint. Don't give a ——. He was too o'nary tuh live anyhow. But the low-down skunk that done fer Andy settles with me."

"S' help me, Wingy," whined Jude, crouched against his bunk, "S' help me, I don't —"

"Dry up, yuh snivelin' skunk. Not a word tuh Heavy er Chappo, any uh you, hear me? I'm layin' low till the time comes tuh strike. You, Jude, if yuh open yore trap tuh that greaser, I'll ——"

"I won't! I swear I won't, Wingy!"

"No," sneered Wingy, crossing the room and looking down at him, "I don't think yuh will, Jude. Yo're too yaller. Yuh go up ag'in' a gun without quittin', but yuh can't stand the idee uh this purty lil ol' hook uh mine wrigglin' in yore innards."

Talbert, silent through this scene between the two, seemed not displeased with the turn that affairs had taken. The Kid, filled with disgust for the cowardly Jude and horror of the brutality of Wingy, stepped over to where Squint lay on the blood-stained bed. For a moment he looked down, at the glazed, staring eyes of the dead man. Then he pulled the tarpaulin over the body. Talbert watched him from his bunk.

Wingy went outside to put up his horse and Jude followed.

"Better pull out tonight, Kid," said Talbert in a low tone as the Kid brought a basin of water and fresh bandages to dress the leader's wound.

"No, chief, I'm playin' my string out."

"—— is gonna pop afore long, boy. None of 'em like yuh. I made a bad mistake, takin' yore side."

"Yuh done what yuh thought was right and square, chief. And I'm obliged a heap. But I'm stayin'. Who do yuh reckon killed Squint?"

"Wisht I knowed. Jude, mebbe, er Heavy. I think Chappo'd uh used a knife if he'd done it. They done their best tuh lay it on you, Kid. A killin' like that leads tuh more. Take keer it ain't you they git."

The Kid laughed shortly.

"I ain't bad scared, Silver. When it comes, it comes. A man dies when his time comes, not afore."

"Kinda look at it thataway myse'f, Kid. How's the hole in my leg look?"

"A mite better, seems like. She's healin' slow, though."

"—— slow. It's tough, layin' here day after day. Gits a man's strength an' makes him ornary."

"A doc'd patch that up pronto, Silver. I could make it on the snowshoes an' fetch one."

"Let's don't argy that no more, boy. I don't want no saw-bones pawin' me. Besides, them boys'd never let him go back alive."

"And that's why yuh won't let me fetch him, chief. Fer a man that's stuck up banks an' trains an' stood up when bullets was thicker'n hail, yo're a queer 'un, Silver."

"How come, Kid?"

"So kinda understandin'-like uh other folks. Most gents in yore fix 'd lemme fetch that doctor, and if the boys here killed him after he'd done his work—well, it'd be all in the game. But not you. You'd take a chance on dyin' from blood-poison, rather than have a doc."

Talbert smiled.

"I gotta heap uh respect fer a doctor,

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Kid. A heap more respect than I have fer most gospel preachers. Doctors does a shore lot uh good in this world. If it come to a show down, his life is worth a heap more'n mine, savvy? It's jest common sense tuh not let one come here an' git hisse'f killed on my account."

"Yet," argued the kid. "If that same doctor gent was tuh git in the way while you was stickin' up a bank er makin' a getaway, you'd drop him where he stood."

"Reckon I would," agreed Talbert. "If he made a try tuh butt in. But this is different. I never killed no man that never had an even break fer his gun. And if a doctor was tuh come here, he'd have no more chance uh comin' out alive than a trapped coyote. I'm ornary, Kid, but I ain't no wanton killer. I'd a heap ruther go out a knowin' that I'd stuck to my way uh thinkin' than tuh weaken now an' cross the Big Divide with a black mark like that on the Big Boss's tally book."

"Yuh talk as if yuh'd got religion, Silver."

"My daddy was a circuit rider, Kid. Some uh the religion he drilled inta me, one way an' another, kinda staid put. I've backslid dang nigh to the plumb bottom, but there's some things I've drawed the line at. Cold-blooded killin's one uh them. Now let's fergit it."

That night they divided Squint's money among them. Silver Tip did the dividing. Beside the wad of crumpled greenbacks on his blanket, lay his .45, and in the business of counting and allotting each man his share, the outlaw leader's right hand never strayed more than a few inches from the weapon.

Jude's shifting eyes, like steel attracted by a magnet, flitted always back to Wingy who squatted cross-legged on his bunk, filing his hook until its point was sharp as a needle.

Chappo, catching Jude's glance once, winked, and Jude's hands shook so that he spilled the tobacco from the cigaret he was rolling. Wingy laughed shortly and tested the point of the shining hook with a calloused thumb.

Heavy, watching the division of the murdered bandit's money, played tune after tune on the harmonica, but counted with the leader every time a crumpled bill left the pile in Silver's lap to fatten one of the six neat piles in front of him on the tarpaulin.

The Kid was washing the dishes and paid no apparent heed to the counting of the money.

Squint had carried his wealth in a bit of canvas pinned to the breast of his undershirt. Blood from the wound had soaked through the canvas and stained some of the bank notes.

"Ees bad lock," muttered Chappo when the men picked up their respective piles of money. "Ees bad lock, thees blood."

"Swap yuh clean tens fer all the blood-stained twenties yuh got, greaser," grinned Heavy. "I ain't bothered none with spooky notions."

Chappo hesitated a moment, then peeled the three blood stained twenties from his roll.

"I swap, Heavy. Me, I'm bad scare of dead man's money weeth blood on heem."

"Wisht I had a wagon-load of the stuff," laughed Heavy, handing over three unmarred ten dollar bills and taking the blood stained twenties from the Mexican. Anybody else want tuh swap off their soiled dough?"

"We ain't all uh us fools," replied Wingy. "Who's bankin' the poker game this evenin'?"

"Me," said Heavy.

"Then let's go, big 'un. I want tuh see kin I win some uh the late lamented Squint's money off yuh."

IN THIS Wingy was doomed to disappointment. Until ten o'clock, Jude and Chappo won steadily. Then the cards were shoved across the table to Heavy whose deal came next.

Heavy gathered in the cards, then leaned back on his narrow bench. A .45 appeared suddenly in his hand, and he laid the weapon on the table. Then, without a word, his big paws tore the deck of cards in two. Still without speaking, he handed Chappo and Jude each a half of the torn deck.

"Them as has a holler in their system that's rearin' tuh come out, let's have it," grinned the big man. "Jude? Chappo?"

Jude shook his head, chagrin and baffled rage working his lips in soundless protest. Chappo merely shrugged and flashed his even teeth in a white smile.

"Ain't you got a deck uh cards in yore bed, Kid?" Heavy inquired of the youth who was fashioning a shirt from a tanned deer hide.

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"He'p yorese'f, Heavy. Under the piller."

"Got 'em sanded, button?" inquired Wingy.

"If I have it's too good a job uh markin' fer you tuh read their brands," grinned the Kid.

Heavy procured the cards and the game went on. The luck seemed to belong to the big man. He raked in pot after pot until the pile of bank notes and gold coin rose to alarming proportions.

Silver Tip turned his face to the log wall and went to sleep. The Kid turned in shortly after midnight. The men played on.

Dawn found them still at it. Heavy, flushed of face, seemed drunk by his winning. Wingy was but a few dollars ahead and heavy-eyed with sleep. Jude was three hundred loser and snarled and cursed at each hand he drew.

Chappo, always a hard loser, implored by turns, the aid of the Devil and the assistance of the Saints. As the first gray light of the new-born day penetrated the frost-coated window pane, the Mexican lost his last green back on a bob-tail flush.

Muttering curses in his native tongue, he scrambled to his feet and went outside.

"Thought yuh said that blood-stained money was bad luck, greaser?" Heavy called after him tauntingly.

Chappo, cursing his way to the stable, made no reply.

"Mebbeso, Heavy," Wingy made prophecy, "yore luck'll change afore yo're much older. Now if yuh was tuh fall down, fer instance, and bust yore neck, that dough'd not do yuh no good a-tall where you'd go."

Heavy's voice boomed with laughter as he pocketed his winnings and rose. No one joined in the laugh.

The Kid started breakfast going while the poker players washed the sleep from their bloodshot eyes with melted snow water.

No one, save perhaps the Kid, paid heed to the cold body of Squint that lay in the corner, covered with a soiled tarp.

IV

SUPPER time, the following evening, found one member of the outlaw band missing at the evening meal. That member was Heavy.

No man commented on the big man's absence. Conversation during the meal was stilted, Each lull was charged with an unpleasant tenseness. With the coming of dark came the yap-yapping of what sounded like a hundred coyotes. There would be many tracks tomorrow beneath the tall cottonwood where Squint's tarpaulin covered body was lashed to the limbs out of reach. The ground had been too solidly frozen to permit grave digging.

"Them timber wolves is gittin' plumb nervy," Silver Tip Talbert broke a long silence. "Seen five uh the varmints pass by the clearin' this mornin' after you boys pulled out. Big 'uns. Musta come down from Canady. I've heered tell they'd pull down a man if they was bad hungry, which them five shore looked tuh be."

Wingy, blowing a cup of steaming coffee, looked squarely at the outlaw leader. A slow smile widened the lips of the one-armed renegade.

"If a man was tuh git hurt er killed, them wolves'd make short work uh him, Talbert. Come mornin' there wouldn't be enough left uh Mister Man tuh pay gatherin' him up. Even a man Heavy's size. Pass over the canned cow, will yuh, Jude. This coffee needs coolin'."

Jude's hand shook as it held out the can. Wingy's smile widened but held no mirth. Only taunting challenge.

"Heavy musta took tuh workin' off some belly by hoofin' it through the drifts," Wingy went on. "I run acrost his hoss a comin' along the Rock Crick gorge, the bridle reins layin' on its neck. I done brung the hoss in. Afeerd the wolves'd pull it down."

"Mebbeso the hoss floundered into a deep drift an' Heavy quit 'im," ventured the Kid. "A man had orter ride without knottin' his bridle reins."

"I got set afoot thataway myself, once," added Jude.

He forced a laugh from his loose lips.

"Walked five mile in a norther. Since then I don't knot my reins."

Another silence followed Jude's remark. The yelping of the coyotes had momentarily ceased. Then, borne on the night wind that sobbed and sighed through the scrub pines, came the faint report of a gun. Jude leaped clear of the bench, a hoarse cry bursting from his slack lips.

Chappo gripped his partner's arm and pulled him back to the seat.

"That'll be Heavy, I reckon," said Wingy easily, "takin' a shot at a hoot owl er

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mebbeso one uh Talbert's wolves. Say, Kid, jest where in —— d'yuh think yo're goin'?"

Wingy's last words were harsh as a grating file. He half-turned on the bench to face the Kid who had put on his cap and was shrugging into his overcoat.

"If Heavy's hoss has th'owed him er somethin' and he's hurt, he'll be needin' a hand tuh make it home. I don't waste no heap uh kind feelin' towards him, but dang it, he's a human bein' an' them wolves is devils. I aim tuh find him."

The Kid spoke quietly, but with an air of finality. His eyes were steady and without a trace of fear as they met the cold gaze of Wingy.

"And if I say yuh can't?" he asked, jaw thrust forward.

"I told yuh I was goin', Wingy. Whether you like it or not don't matter a ——. Save yore bullyin' fer them that's scairt uh that hay hook uh yourn. Try tuh use it on me'n I'll learn yuh that a bullet kin travel faster'n a iron hook."

"Bold, ain't yuh rooster. Silver Tip backin' yore play?"

"No," replied Talbert. "The Kid don't seem tuh be needin' no backin'. Personal, I wouldn't go six foot outside the door tuh bring this Heavy gent. Looks tuh me like the Kid's wastin' time, but that's his bet, not mine. Make it yourn, Wingy, if yuh feel lucky."

"Told yuh it'd come easy after that fust shootin' the Kid done," whispered Jude to Chappo. "See them eyes uh his'n? Killer's eyes, greaser."

If Wingy heard Jude's whisper, he gave no sign. His eyes were fixed unblinkingly on the Kid's face.

The Kid fastened the frogs of his fur coat with his left hand. The right was in the huge pocket of the coat, gripping the handle of his Colt. When he had finished the fastening of his coat, he picked up his crude snowshoes and his carbine and walked to the door.

Wingy watched him steadily but made no move to stop him. After the Kid had closed the door behind him, Wingy sat staring at its rough-hewn boards. His expression was more puzzled than angry when he turned to Talbert.

"Kin you tell me why in —— that idiot should want tuh go out there after a no 'count like Heavy?" he asked. "A man 'ud think they was kin folks."

"I told yuh the Kid didn't belong here," explained Silver Tip wearily.

"How come yuh let him in on the play at first if he ain't our kind?"

"I figgered he done somethin' tuh bust the law, Wingy. Killed a man er got tangled up in a beef stealin' scrape. Otherwise I'd uh sent him along the trail. He don't belong."

"Mebbe not, Talbert, but he's gonna stick it out. Till the last card is on the table, face up."

Again, from a distance, the flat spat of .45. Jude's face looked pasty white in the candle light. The other three men gave no sign that they had heard the shot.

Out under the white light of a full moon the Kid moved along the trail on his crude webs. By means of a rope that came over his shoulders and under his arm pits, he dragged a green deer-hide, frozen hard as a board. The improvised sled swished across the hard-packed snow without hindering the long, springy strides of the hauler.

The Kid's lips tightened as he heard the shots, and his stride quickened to a long, swinging half-trot. In his mind he pictured the big outlaw fighting for his life against the starving wolf pack. With his fur mittens he warmed the mechanism of his carbine.

Minutes dragged like hours. The gruelling pace was sending fine, needle sharp pains up the calves of his legs and knotting his thigh muscles. His breath became labored as he bent forward, dragging the deer hide that had begun to pull at his back until the rope hurt. Once he stopped to shed his fur coat and toss it aside to be picked up on the homeward trip.

Then, in a tiny clearing, he saw Heavy's big bulk, huddled against a pine. Gray shadows, swift moving and silent, moved in the brush. A red flash from Heavy's gun and one of the gray shapes leaped high in the air, snarling and snapping where the lead slug had torn into its shoulder. The next instant, two white fanged, snarling animals were on their wounded fellow, tearing at him.

Spat! Crash! The Kid dropped them in their tracks, then moved to where Heavy lay propped with his back to the pine tree.

Blood-smeared, ghastly in the white moonlight, the big outlaw opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. As the Kid bent over him, slipping an arm under the

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other's bare head, Heavy thanked him with his eyes. A tremor shook the bulky frame and the Kid knew that he held a dead man.

The Kid drew the hide alongside and laid the limp body on it. Then he made a hasty but careful examination.

The big man's right arm was broken above the wrist. There was a long gash across his abdomen that had disemboweled him. There was no other mark on his body.

The swollen condition of the blue wrist and arm told the Kid that it had been broken probably two hours before. The blood-stained trail across the snow marked the tortured progress of the wounded man to the spot where he could best make his last stand against the wolf pack. Whoever had attacked the big outlaw, had deliberately left him to die a slow death. The cold-bloodedness of it sent a shiver down the boy's spine as he examined the ripped shirt and the wound.

A knife might have made that ugly slash. A knife or a steel hook, filed to needle point. One of two men had committed the dastardly crime. Chappo or Wingy. Either man was capable of it. The Kid shoved a hand inside the dead outlaw's shirt where he knew Heavy kept his money in a buckskin sack that fastened about the thick neck by a slender thong. The sack and money were gone.

Came the memory of Chappo's bad luck at poker the previous night. Came also Wingy's words:

"Mebbeso, Heavy, yore luck'll change afore yo're much older. If yuh was tuh fall down, fer instance, and bust yore neck, that dough'd not do yuh no good a-tall where yoh'd go."

That broken arm! Wingy's deadly hammerlock that could break a bone like the snapping of a dry stick! Had the one armed outlaw taken this ghastly means of avenging Black Andy's death?

Yet, that hook, while it might rip the soft flesh like a knife, would not leave such a clean tear in the heavy mackinaw shirt. The fabric of shirt and heavy wool undershirt beneath, was clean cut as if by a razor.

Chappo or Wingy? Or both? Perhaps, with the cowering Jude as witness.

The Kid deliberated the matter as he smoked a cigaret. Then he picked up the rope and bent his back to the task of dragging the big bulk of the dead man to the cabin.

V

HE FOUND Jude, Chappo and Wingy absorbed in a poker game. Not one of them made a move to render assistance as the Kid bore Heavy's great body to its bed and laid it out.

Silver Tip, watching the Kid from beneath bushy brows, gave no sign of approval or displeasure. A mask could have hid the leader's emotions no better.

The faces of the others were a study. Jude's lips worked and his green eyes shifted from Wingy to Chappo and back to Talbert.

Chappo's dark eyes snapped like twin coals and his teeth showed in a smile that held no meaning. A cat, about to spring, might look like that.

Wingy rubbed his shining hook across the dirty stubble of beard that covered his face almost to the eyes. He seemed vaguely puzzled, somehow. The Kid, watching him, tried to read what lay behind the opaque chill of his eyes, but learned less than nothing.

"Yuh found him like that?" Wingy inquired, his words coming slowly as if he merely voiced a thought and expected no reply.

"Jest like that," answered the Kid quietly, "except that he was alive."

A quick intake of breath sounded like the hiss of a snake from Chappo.

"Talked, did he?" sneered Wingy.

The Kid held his answer as he looked from Wingy to Chappo and from Chappo to Jude.

"No," he said, pulling the tarp over Heavy's blood-smeared body. "He was too far gone."

"What difference 'ud it make if Heavy had talked?" drawled Talbert, speaking for the first time. There was a queer smile on the old leader's face. A smile that was tainted with bitter harshness. "Heavy never left no friend behind tuh pick up the hand he dropped. Who killed him, er how, don't matter a —— so fur as I kin see."

"Shore thing," leered Jude, utter relief in his tone. "He's croaked an' that's the end of it."

"*Si, si*," smiled Chappo. "Ees too —— bad, per'aps, that 'e die so yong, but she can' be 'elp any, no?"

His slender hands went out in an expressive gesture.

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"Right as ——, eh Kid?" added Wingy, smiling nastily.

"Reckon so."

The Kid reached for the wash-basin, then looked over his shoulder at the men grouped about the blanket.

"Keerful uh that blood-stained money, Chappo. It done brought Heavy bad luck."

"In dividin' Heavy's wad uh dough," grinned Wingy evilly, "seems like you drawed the blood stained notes. We deevided while yuh was gone. Yore share's on the bunk."

"Didn't know you boys had Heavy's money."

"Seems like Jude picked it up along the trail," said Talbert. "Heavy musta got keerless an' dropped it. Fetch some wood, Kid. Fire's gittin' low."

Talbert's voice was cold, almost disapproving. The Kid sensed that a change had come over the old outlaw. Perhaps it was the constant pain of his wound that made his lips thin like a cruel slash across his mask-like face. As for his eyes, they were mere pin points of cold light in sunken sockets under the bushy brows.

"Heavy was tellin' me today," said Wingy, picking up the cards to resume the game, "that it wa'n't him that done fer Black Andy. I got reason tuh know he didn't lie none. Yore deal, Chappo. Ante there, Jude."

VI

TWO tarpaulin-wrapped forms decorated the skeleton limbs of the giant cottonwoods.

There had been no ceremony to solemnize the gruesome task. No words spoken save when Wingy cursed the bulk of the dead man as they hoisted it into the tree. Chappo complained of the bitter wind that whipped particles of snow into their faces.

The task of disposing of the body at an end, the Kid fastened on his webs, took a carbine and set out into the storm that was brewing in the north. Overhead, a lead-hued sky, underfoot the shifting white snow that swirled and swept up into the boy's face with almost suffocating blasts.

No need for a posted guard on the pinnacles while such bitter weather held. To have ordered one of the outlaws to such a task would mean open mutiny that smoldered always, ready to burst into flame. Talbert's position of leader was beginning to wobble. Gradually, almost imperceptible in its progress, the domination of Wingy had undermined the authority of Silver Tip. Jude and Chappo feared the one-armed bandit and hated him the more on account of that fear.

Talbert, helpless on his bunk, brooded for hours, silent and watchful. More than any man among them, he sensed this growing influence of Wingy. His hand never got far from the gun under his pillow. His sleep was light, his back against the wall. The gnawing pain of his wounded leg had scraped his nerves to the quick, even as it had drawn the flesh from his body and left him weak and hollow-cheeked.

His attitude had become that of a man whose days are numbered but still clings to life. To the Kid it seemed that something inside Silver Tip Talbert had died and the scar of its passing lay in the man's hard eyes. It was, perhaps, that subtle understanding of his fellowmen that had gone from him, leaving more marked in his face and speech, the bitter hatred and the cold cruelty that stamps the souls of men who are hunted like beasts. He had in the past few days become Talbert, the killer, a man who, at the end, would give no mercy nor accept it. Silent, almost sullen, he lay on his bunk, staring into space or watching the others.

Talbert's attitude towards the Kid had changed from a friendly comradeship to surly coldness. At the leader's curt suggestion, he had relinquished his task of dressing Talbert's wound, and Wingy now attended to it. This new order of things had hurt the boy and given Wingy a savage joy which he took no pains in hiding.

Now, as the Kid swung along over the snow, he pondered deeply on this change of heart on Talbert's part. He grew resentful towards this man who could so easily mar a friendship. He struggled to cast aside his friendly feeling towards Silver Tip, but somehow he could not find it in his heart to condemn the white-haired outlaw.

"It's the hole in his leg that makes him so o'nary," he excused the man who had won his loyalty and affection.

The ping of a steel-jacket rifle bullet cut his musing short. The shot had missed his head by a bare inch.

Flipping off his mitten, the Kid jerked his

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Winchester to his shoulder and without aiming, fired at a moving blur two hundred yards away on the back trail. Then he ducked behind a fallen log and waited, cocked gun ready.

The blurred form was lost now in the swirling snow. The driving wind, picking up the hard, fine particles of snow, destroyed visibility beyond a hundred yards.

Minutes dragged slowly by. Half an hour of this tense waiting left the Kid stiff with cold. With an impatient curse, he rose and with all swiftness possible, ran on his webs directly towards the spot where he had seen that indistinct shadow of a man.

He found half-buried tracks behind a thick trunked tree. An empty .30-.40 shell, and several tiny red stains in the snow. No more.

"My shot nicked him, anyhow," decided the Kid. "I'll know, when I look them three skunks over, which uh them done it."

The knowledge that he was marked for death filled him with a cold, calculating anger. He did not hasten his steps as he fought his way through the storm which was rapidly assuming the proportions of a nasty blizzard.

Outside the cabin, he kicked off his snowshoes and, with his hand on the .45 in his pocket, entered the cabin.

Wingy, Jude, and Chappo sat about the table which was drawn alongside Talbert's bunk. Silver Tip was dealing cards to them. Each, including Talbert, had a stack of money in front of him. All seemed absorbed in their game of poker.

They greeted the Kid with an indifferent glance, then went on with their playing.

Without taking his eyes from the group, the Kid shrugged out of his coat. This, without releasing the grip on his gun which he pulled through the coat sleeve and, once rid of the coat, shoved the weapon well forward in the waistband of his blanket-lined overalls. He frowned in an annoyed manner as his searching glance found no trace of a bullet wound on any of the men. Not one of them, by so much as a glance, paid him the slightest attention.

Bets were made, cards drawn, more bets, then Wingy raked in a sizeable pot. The cards were shoved to Chappo.

"If yuh don't aim tuh set in the game, Kid," growled Talbert, "git busy an' rustle grub. It's past noon an' we ain't et. Wood's about used up, too. Split some. Mind, yuh bring in pitch wood, not that damn cottonwood punk like yuh fetched yesterday."

The surly tone of Talbert's command brought a quick flush to the Kid's frost-blackened cheeks. A hot retort surged to his tongue but died unspoken as he returned the cold glance of his leader's bloodshot eyes.

"He's sick," the Kid made excuse for Talbert. "—— sick."

Without a word he nodded to Silver Tip and moved to obey the command.

All that afternoon and late into the night, they played, the Kid joining them because there was nothing else to do.

Luck favored the young outlaw and when the game broke up some time after midnight, he was a heavy winner. Jude and Chappo both lost heavily. Talbert and Wingy were several hundred dollars ahead of the game.

Wingy, indicating with the point of his hook one of the blood-stained greenbacks on the Kid's pile, grinned nastily.

"Bad luck, Kid. Better git shet up that spotted dough. Mind what happened tuh Heavy."

"I ain't fergittin', pardner. Not fer one minute. I was reminded plumb strong, this mornin'."

So far, the Kid had been unable to detect which of the three men had shot at him and in turn had been wounded. The wound must have been a slight one. He was of the opinion that all three had combined to put him out of the way. A showdown would be a relief, regardless of its outcome. Now he searched Wingy's face for some sign that would brand the one-armed man as his assailant. In this he was disappointed. Wingy returned his gaze with sneering insolence, lighted a cigaret, and flopped on his bed to jerk off his boots preparatory to retiring.

Silver Tip lighted a fresh candle and with its drippings, stuck it upright on the table.

"I want this candle left burnin'," he growled, and gave no further explanation of his act.

"But the light shines plumb square in my eyes where my bed lays," whined Jude.

"Then move yore bed," snapped Talbert.

It was a sickly flame that threw grotesque shadows into the corners. Threads of wind, torn from the howling blizzard that raged outside, sifted through the window casing to flatten the yellow flame. Then it would rise again as if defying the breeze, flickering and sputtering.

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Jude pulled his bed far into the shadow against the wall. Soon the cabin was filled with the labored breathing of sleeping men. The tiny flame threw out its misshapen shadows on the log walls.

For a long time the Kid lay watching the weird shadows, then sleep enfolded him in its soothing embrace, and he lost consciousness. Somewhere in the semi-darkness of the room, a cheap watch ticked away the seconds that lengthened into minutes and became hours.

The roaring crash of a .45! Darkness, sticky in its blackness. The thud of a falling body. Then an aching, throbbing silence and the stifling fumes of burnt gunpowder. Then, out of the tense blackness, the measured drawl of Silver Tip Talbert's voice.

"Jude aimed tuh knife me. I killed him. Light the candle, one uh yuh, it done went out."

It was Wingy who struck a match and bore the cupped flame to the candle wick. Face downward on the dirt floor lay Jude, a butcher knife gripped in his lifeless hand. Blood oozed from the hole just above his left ear, crusting the dirt with a dark stain.

"Pitch his dirty carcass outside," growled Talbert, thin smoke filming from his tilted gun barrel. "You, Kid, lend Wingy a hand there. Don't stand around like a cow waitin' tuh be milked."

"But those wolf!" protested Chappo uneasily.

Talbert shot the Mexican a glowering look that silenced him. The Kid, sick with the cold-bloodedness of the thing, moved to obey the leader's harsh command. As he stooped over the dead man, he saw a dirty bandage knotted about Jude's left leg below the knee. The would-be murderer's trouser leg had slipped up, revealing the hairy calf and the blood-stained bandage. The Kid shoved the knotted cloth aside and stared for a moment at the slight wound in the hard flesh. The wound made by his, the Kid's, rifle the previous morning. It was Jude, then, who had tried to kill him.

"If yo're sick tuh yore stummick, Kid, go lay down," sneered Wingy and hooking the dead man's shirt collar, dragged the limp body across the floor. Flinging the door open, he bowed his head to the driving blizzard and hauled the dead man into the snow.

The sudden draught had snuffed out the candle light. No one moved to light it. The wind drove clouds of snow into the cabin. Then the door slammed shut and Wingy's short laugh cut the darkness. The next instant a match flared in Talbert's hand and re-lighted the candle.

"Rustle breakfast, Kid," he commanded gruffly. "I'm hungry an' need a shot uh coffee. This damn leg's bin givin' me hell 'all night. I was layin' here tryin' tuh sleep when that skunk quit his bed tuh do his carvin'."

VII

THE blizzard lasted three days and nights. The snow piled high against the log cabin and they resorted to shoveling in order to tunnel through the drifts to get fresh wood.

The tempers of every man became sharp. Long silences burdened the dragging hours. Poker was their only diversion.

Sometimes Talbert played, at other times he lay on his bunk, staring morosely at nothing. When Wingy taunted Chappo, the white-haired outlaw watched and smiled thinly. This baiting of the Mexican was growing steadily more marked.

Studied in its cruelty was the taunting by the one-armed man who seemed to derive a savage, primitive joy from his demoniacal torture of the black-eyed Chappo. He played upon the ignorant superstitions of the Mexican at times. Again, he taunted Chappo until the latter was pale and trembling with hot-blooded rage. No coward was Chappo, but he respected the fighting prowess of Wingy and avoided actual combat. Knowing this, Wingy played upon the emotions of the other man as an accomplished musician fingers the keyboard of a piano.

Sometimes Chappo glanced at Talbert, helpless appeal in his dark eyes, but the old outlaw merely smiled thinly and made no move to interfere.

The Kid, glad of the respite which diverted Wingy's attentions from him, spent much of his time in the formation of a plan to escape from this cabin of death.

Talbert's attitude towards him had become so marked in its change that the boy could not help but wonder if Silver Tip was not losing his mind. Surly, crabbed, unreasoning in his commands, he had the Kid doing every sort of menial task his fertile brain could devise. Wingy and Chappo

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were relieved of all the labor now. The Kid cooked, washed the dishes, laundered their clothes, split wood, and kept the cabin clean. These things he did at Talbert's unsmiling command, without a word of protest. Inwardly, he felt resentful, and thus in silence, sore at heart and thoroughly disgusted with the men with whom he lived, he planned his escape.

His was the only pair of showshoes in camp. The heavy drifts made horseback traveling impossible. Once he was away from camp, beyond rifle shot, escape would be simple. The Kid worked over his deerskin shirt, mended his webs and stored dried venison, bit by bit, in the pockets of his clothes.

Thus prepared for his journey, he bided his time until the storm should diminish. Impatiently, he waited for a break in that snow-filled, leaden sky that would mean a chance for freedom. If ever a would-be outlaw was fed up on the game of playing bad, it was the Kid as he stared through the window, out into the swirling snow.

"Quit mopin' like a —— love-sick school gal an' git them dishes washed," sneered Talbert. "Mind yuh do a better job than yuh done last evenin'. Some uh them plates was dirtier'n Chappo's ears. An' lemme tell yuh suthin', young 'un, if yuh don't quit droppin' yore paw on that smoke pole uh yourn, I'll make yuh use it."

The Kid dropped his hand from the .45 in his waistband, and avoided Talbert's eyes as he went to carry out the command. He did not want any man to read the expression of his face just then. His game was a waiting one. Open clash meant more spilled blood and he was utterly sick of killings.

That happened on the third and last day of the storm. That night Wingy lost heavily at poker and thus put in an ugly mood, taunted Chappo until the Mexican's dark eyes blazed with pent up fury.

"*For* why, Señor Weengy, you make those bad talk at me, eh?" he asked at last.

"Why?" Wingy's voice was cold as ice. "Why, greaser? Because, —— yuh, Heavy told what he knowed, that's why. He blabbed it, —— him, after I'd busted his arm with a little bolt I'd like tuh try on you. It was you that shot Black Andy when Jude weakened at the job. Black Andy was my pardner. When I git ready, greaser, I'm jerkin' out yore black heart. When I git ready, savvy?"

"Heavy ees lie!" panted Chappo, fingering the hilt of his knife.

"No, reckon not. If he lied, why did you an' Jude rip him open when yuh found him comin' tuh camp afoot with his arm busted?"

"Ees bad man, that Heavy hombre," explained Chappo uneasily.

Wingy laughed shortly, his hook poised to strike.

"Yeah?"

"*Si.* Ees bad in the 'eart, that one. Me, I see heem keel Squint. For that, I keel thees Heavy like one keel the snake."

"Yuh say yuh seen him kill Squint?"

"*Si, si.*"

"Yuh lie, blast yore yaller hide. Yuh lie. I killed Squint, myself."

"You?" Talbert asked the question indifferently.

"Why not? Him an' Jude an' this greaser was framin' up tuh kill off the rest uh us. I heered 'em talkin' it over. I got a good shot at 'im and took it. Come —— nigh hangin' it on the Kid, too."

Wingy chuckled at the recollection.

"I hope, Talbert," he went coolly on, "that yuh ain't goin' tuh raise no holler about my bumpin' off the Squint coyote?"

There was a challenge in the one-armed outlaw's question. Plain it was that Wingy sensed that he was master of the situation and felt bold to speak of his crime.

Talbert shrugged indifferently.

"Yuh played yore cards clever, Wingy. I had it figgered that Jude er Chappo had done that killin'. S'posin' yuh fetch out the cards an' we has a few hands uh draw?"

"That's the speerit, Silver Tip," said Wingy, jigging a few steps and kicking a cigaret from Chappo's white lips.

He halted by Talbert's bunk, looking down at the wounded man, smiling oddly.

"When we fust hit here, Talbert, I figgered yuh was th'owin' the hooks into us boys and poolin' yore bets with this bald-faced Kid. It does my heart good tuh see yuh act like yore old self. Some day when we gits tired uh the Kid's cookin', I'll put him where the dogs can't bark at 'im, the —— quitter. More an' more I reads in his eyes the hankerin' tuh deepart from our sweet company. He'll go right enough, but by a quicker route than the one he figgers on. With Wingy a watchin' him, he won't git far on them purty webs uh his'n."

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The Kid, standing by the stove, went rigid. Standing easily on his moccasin clad feet, he faced Wingy.

"How about now fer the sign bein' right?" he asked evenly. "I ain't scared uh you ner yore dirty hook, mister."

"We ain't tired uh yore cookin' yet," grinned Wingy evilly. "Besides, I want yuh tuh be stickin' around when I rips the greaser tuh pieces. I want yuh to enjoy the show. There's two hundred thousand dollars in this shack. A purty stake fer me'n Silver Tip tuh start in the cow business in the Argentine.

"Two hundred thousand dollars, gents! Jude an' Chappo an' Squint figgered on a three way split but they bungled the job. Heavy kinda propositioned me regardin' a two time cut after we'd cleared the trail. But I didn't trust Heavy because he'd kinda cottoned tuh Jude an' the Mex. Talbert felt the Kid out, near as I kin figger, then when you goes soft on him, Kid, he's offa yuh like a dirty shirt. She filters down to me'n Silver Tip now, eh Silver?

Again there was a hidden challenge in Wingy's tone. The ugly steel hook was, with apparent carelessness, held close to the wounded man's neck. The eyes of the two men met and held. The Kid, watching tensely, held his breath, awaiting the reply of the man who had called him "friend" and talked to him almost as a father might talk to a son. Would Talbert agree to this cold blooded planning of wholesale murder?

"Looks like you'd done figgered it out keerful, Wingy," smiled Talbert. "We'll cut quite a figger among the Argentine dance halls."

TALBERT'S right hand was under his pillow as usual. There was an even chance that he could kill Wingy before that deadly hook sank into his neck. Yet he had met the one-armed outlaw's eyes without a flicker of fear and had accepted his terms.

The acceptance decided the Kid. This man whom he had trusted was no better than these other two-legged beasts. The boy felt now, as he had never felt before, that he owed Talbert no allegiance. He would get away somehow. Shoot his way out of it if he must, and give himself up to the law to take his punishment. When he had served his sentence, he would make a fresh start.

Not once did the Kid turn his back to Wingy whose eyes constantly followed him. Never, for an instant when Wingy was within striking distance, did the boy's hand stray far from his gun. Wingy would not risk a shooting scrape with an even break. He feared the lightning quickness of the boy's gun hand.

He would bide his time and strike when he had the advantage. Then, too, Chappo distracted Wingy's attention to a certain degree. During these times the Kid felt free to relax. Despite his lost faith in Talbert, the Kid felt certain that the older man would do his killing fairly. Pride, if nothing else, would stay Talbert's gun arm until the break was an even one.

No man slept that night. The candle on the table guttered and flared. Talbert rubbed tobacco in his sunken eyes in an effort to stay awake. Wingy rose several times to drink huge cups of cold black coffee. Night, to every man in the cabin, seemed eternity.

A cold sun broke through the clouds with the coming of daylight. In an hour the sky was cloudless. The wind had died and in its stead was a still cold that thickened the frost on the window panes. Had there been a thermometer, the mercury would have dropped to forty below the zero mark.

Breakfast left Silver Tip Talbert in an almost cheerful mood, albeit his eyes burned feverishly and his face was drawn until the flesh seemed stretched across his cheek bones. When he rolled a cigaret, his hands shook like a man with palsy.

The Kid's hopes surged buoyantly. The storm was over. Given a slight opportunity and he would make a break for it. Once, while his thoughts thus centered on escape, he caught Talbert watching him. An enigmatic smile twitched at the old outlaw's thin lips.

"They say, Wingy," grinned Talbert the next instant, "that a man with money kin have one —— of a time in South America."

"I'll tell a man!" agreed Wingy heartily. "Say, Kid, can't yuh rustle nothin' more fillin' than this sow belly?"

"Let him take the .22 an' bring in a blacktail," suggested Talbert.

"An' let 'im give us the slip? Reckon not, Talbert. Look here, one man posted on guard kin see ary possee comin' an' warn us so's we kin see 'em in time tuh mow 'em down as they pass along where the trail

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narrows. *But*, there's no deer this side uh that spot. The guard's gotta let him pass that point an' beyond gun range tuh git tuh where there's deer. He'll be in sight, yeah, fer ten mile, mebbe, beyond that point, but he'll be outa range and travelin' on snowshoes, where a hoss can't foller. We kin keep sheriffs out because they gotta pass under our noses in plain sight, along a trail that's narrow an' slow travelin'. But, when we lets the Kid pass that point, we're signin' his ticket home."

"A lot uh good it'd do him tuh try it," smiled Talbert. "It'd take him better'n a week tuh make Chinook on foot. No human livin' could make that trip in weather as cold as this on an empty belly. He'd be froze stiff in forty-eight hours. See that he don't take no pack with 'im, an' turn him loose. We need meat. Either that, er go yorese'f."

"Got me foul, there, ain't yuh Talbert?" said Wingy.

The Kid wondered what the one-armed murderer meant. Then Wingy swung from Talbert to him.

"Take the little gun an' do as Silver says, Kid," he snapped. "Mind yuh don't carry so much as a spud with yuh, ner no blanket. Git goin'."

The Kid, hopes soaring, yet fearful lest Wingy think of searching him and discover the jerked venison, moved slowly as if reluctant to go.

"Couldn't yuh wait till the weather warmed up some, Wingy?" he demurred. "It's forty below outside, er I'm a nigger. An' webs er no webs, that snow ain't had time to settle, an' a man sinks belly-deep in the drifts."

"Drag it, I told yuh," snarled Wingy. "An' if yuh try fer a getaway an' I ketch yuh afore yuh freeze to death, I'll give yuh a taste uh sharp steel tuh carry tuh hell with yuh. Git!"

The Kid reached for his fur coat but Wingy blocked the movement.

"Yuh won't need no heavy clothes. Yuh ain't gonna be gone long, mind."

The Kid shrugged; picked up the little rifle and, taking his snowshoes, went to the door.

As he backed out, fearful of turning his face from the treacherous Wingy, his eyes met Talbert's.

The white-haired leader was glowering at him from under his heavy brows. His face, sunken and harsh, looked like wrinkled parchment pulled over bones that had no padding of flesh. The muscles of that terrible face were twitching involuntarily, and the bony hands that showed white against the dirty tarp, looked transparent in their emaciation. The Kid, looking at the man for what he now prayed would be the last time, realized with a shock how wasted in flesh and vitality Silver Tip Talbert had become. Then he shut the door to blot out the vision.

Flattening himself against the log wall out of range of a chance shot through the door, he stooped to fasten on his snowshoes. His toe touched a hard, metallic object, and he picked it up. It was a .45. Without speculating on its ownership or how it came to be there, he shoved it into his waistband. Then he plowed his way through the great drifts.

Hour after hour, awkward webs sinking deep in the feathery snow, the Kid battled his way through piled drifts, putting distance between him and the cabin. So great was the task of breaking trail that, despite the bitter cold, perspiration trickled from under his fur cap and down his face.

At noon he halted and ate sparingly of his jerked venison. Well he knew that Silver Tip but spoke the truth when he said it was a long journey to Chinook. By stinting, he could make the jerky last five days. Perhaps with the .22 he could bring down a deer or antelope and replenish his supply. Talbert and Wingy, in their calculations, must have overlooked that method of obtaining food. There would be the cold to contend with. Cold that would freeze a man stiff as a board, once he gave way to sleep and inaction.

Well enough here in the timbered bad lands where firewood was plentiful, but out on the bald flats where not even a bush broke the north wind, it would be a grave problem. Mile after mile of rolling hills and bald prairie and not so much as an overcoat to shut out the biting force of the wind and the subtle, treacherous still night chill. He would become leg-weary and tired to the point of exhaustion. He would be forced to fight off the overpowering desire to lie down and sleep. Sleep meant death. A white, cold death.

Munching the tough meat, the Kid gave thought to the perils of the trail ahead. Yet not once did the temptation to return

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to the cabin enter into his reckoning. He felt like a man who was awakening from a horrible nightmare. Here in this clean, white wilderness, he felt at peace. His recent folly seemed unreal now. It was as if the terrible adventure had happened to some one else. He was free!

Head tilted upward, arms spread wide as if to embrace this snow-cleansed land that lay about him, the Kid smiled his thanks to his Maker for this fresh chance to live a clean life. The ritual of prayer was a thing unknown to the range waif. The name of God had never crossed his lips save in careless profanity. It did not come now. His prayer was a smile.

THEN his arms dropped once more to his sides. His hand, in dropping, touched the gun that had lain, half-buried in the snow, outside the outlaw cabin. Idly curious, he pulled forth the gun and glanced at it.

Careless interest gave way to a puzzled frown as he looked more closely at the weapon. On its black butt was scratched a name—

TAL

"Talbert's gun!" said the Kid, voicing his thoughts. "I mind the evenin' he scratched them letters on it with his knife. I wonder how this gun got outside in the snow?"

He stared at the weapon, thoughts whirling. Bit by bit he pieced together scraps of trivial things and wove them into the answer to the puzzle.

Talbert without a gun! Unarmed! At the mercy of Wingy and Chappo! Somehow, Wingy or the Mexican had managed to get the gun while Talbert slept. Some time after the shooting of Jude. Jude, who had lain face downward on the floor, the tip of the ugly knife touching the Kid's bed. His bed! Not Talbert's! Talbert's bunk was across the room. The bullet had hit Jude above the ear, not between the eyes as it should have, if Jude had been coming towards Talbert. It was him, the Kid, whom Jude had tried to stab! Talbert had lied, then. Lied to save trouble for the boy whom he called friend and had treated like a son.

At Talbert's suggestion, he had been given this chance to escape. Things were shaping plainer now in the Kid's mind. He knew now that the surly attitude of the old outlaw had been but a mask to hide his real emotions. He recalled Wingy's remark when the chief suggested that the one-armed bandit take the little gun and get a deer.

"Yuh got me foul there, ain't yuh Talbert?"

Wingy dared not leave the Kid or Chappo alone with Talbert lest the leader get possession of a gun once more.

Talbert, unarmed, had not dared refuse the killer's suggestion of a murder pact. Rather than reveal his true plight to the Kid whom he was trying to drive from the cabin by sham brutality, he had made the sacrifice. What it must have cost Silver Tip Talbert to weaken!

With a hoarse cry, the Kid swung about. Casting aside everything of weight that might hinder his progress, he started along the back trail. Grim-lipped, hard-eyed, he swung with long strides through the soft snow.

On and on, stumbling, falling, struggling to his feet once more, the Kid floundered along the back trail. Muscles ached, his lungs seemed bursting for lack of air, sweat streamed down his neck and into his eyes. Yet he did not halt once not slacken the terrific pace that carried him back to the log-walled hell from which he had escaped.

The sun dropped lower, then sank, a cold, white ball behind a ragged skyline, lead gray in the distance. The shadows of swift twilight had already begun to darken the cañons. Arms swinging with each stride, lips pressed to a thin, cruel line, the Kid kept on. The strain of the terrific pace showed in the drawn jaw muscles and the knotted lines between his frost-whitened brows. His breath froze on the ragged stubble on his cheeks, giving him an odd appearance.

Black splotches of frozen flesh darkened his cheek bones. The neckband of his deerskin shirt had been torn open and the white flesh of his heaving chest was bared to the icy chill of approaching night.

Dark fell like a black, smothering blanket. The Kid fell more often now. Each time he rose, he made sure that his .45 was secure in its holster and that its barrel was free of snow. Beyond that, he paid no heed to anything except the stars that were now his sole guide to the cabin where a brave man faced treacherous death.

A tiny square of yellow light ahead! The

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lighted window of the cabin, a scant hundred yards away. The Kid halted, gulping great lungsful of air until his breathing became less labored. He took the .45 from its holster and warmed it with his breath and mittened hands. Now he spun the cylinder, cocked and recocked the weapon to make sure of its reliability. Then he let the hammer down and with the naked weapon in his hand, moved with cautious tread towards the cabin. Now he halted and rid himself of the cumbersome webs. At the closed door he paused, ears strained to catch the sound of voices that came from within. Wingy, the killer, was talking.

"Yuh knowed that —— Kid wa'n't comin' back, Talbert."

"Yes."

"Figgered tuh play me low down, didn't yuh?"

"I played yuh at yore own game, that's all, and whupped yuh. Knowin' I was dead fer sleep, yuh waited till I'd dozed fer a few minutes. Then yuh snuk up like a Injun and got my gun, hookin' me in the neck tuh keep me quiet when I wakes. But I didn't need no gun tuh whup yuh, Wingy. I done it with my brain."

"Licked me? Me? I reckon not, Talbert. That young 'un'll starve tuh death."

"With the .22 tuh kill game? Reckon not."

"The gun," laughed Wingy harshly, "was empty. I seen tuh that. Had a hunch he'd run fer it. I bet he's on his way back here afore another twelve hours, friz an' snivelin' fer grub. Whupped me with yore brains, did yuh? Yuh shore did—like ——! I seen through yore game, from the start. Treatin' the damn baby rough so's he'd pull out. Which he done, an' me a knowin' the hull dang game! Mebbeso he'll die afore he makes it back here fer grub. If he dies, he'll die hatin' you, Talbert! Hatin' yore guts!"

The Kid, lips parted in a ghastly grin, edged closer to the door. His foot touched something that lay in the snow. Something that wore blood-caked clothes. Swiftly, the Kid stooped and laid a hand on it. No need of a light to tell him that the freezing body was that of Chappo, the Mexican.

Rising, he lifted the latch and slowly shoved open the door.

Wingy, his back to the door, stooping over the bunk where Talbert lay helpless, stiffened as the cold draught of air chilled his back. Yet he did not turn his head nor waver in his speech as he went on talking to Talbert.

"He'll die a hatin' yuh, Talbert," he went on, "Hatin' yuh fer the low down skunk yuh—"

In the middle of the sentence, so quickly that the Kid had no time to shoot, his agile body twisted suddenly sideways and across the room where the candle stood on the table. The table went down with a crash, knocking the candle and plunging the room in darkness.

Sounded the closing of the door and the rasping, choked laugh from the Kid's frost-cracked lips.

"Odds even, Wingy!" he called. "Me an' you fer it!"

"And the devil's rules governin'," snarled Wingy.

The next instant their bodies met with a sickening thud. Steel clashed against steel as the Kid's gun barrel luckily warded a slash of the steel hook. The shock sent the Kid's gun spinning. He grasped the wooden arm butt in his two hands.

THE hot coals in the firebox of the little stove sent slender shafts of light into the darkness. Save for these the room was dark.

Wingy's boot heels scraped across a bed tarp as he wrenched free and struck. The Kid's moccasins made no sound. The labored breathing of the two men, the swish of that wicked hook as it swung in the dark, time and again, seeking soft flesh. Then Wingy's crouched body crossed one of the threads of light.

Spat! The Kid's hard fist thudded against Wingy's jaw, rocking the ugly head. Wingy slumped, staggered, then shaking his head like a bull, charged blindly, arms flailing the darkness.

Gauging Wingy's position by his breathing, the Kid sidestepped the rush and struck again. His fist struck against the head of the other, the knuckles cracking with the impact. Pains shot up the Kid's arm as he dropped on all fours, anticipating the counter attack.

A rush from Wingy. Then a crash as he fell across the Kid and the boy's arms tripped his legs in a football tackle. The Kid was on top of him now, closing in a clinch to lessen the danger of the hook that lashed about blindly. Once more he grabbed

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the wooden butt as the steel ripped his shirt and bit deeply into his shoulder, ripping the muscle like a keen bladed knife. Wingy's other arm, strong as the jaw of a wolf trap, went up and around the Kid's neck and drew his head down until their unshaven cheeks met.

A quick twist and Wingy's teeth sank into the Kid's cheek and met under the flesh. Snarling, Wingy spat out the bit of flesh and snapped once more as the Kid's fist crashed full into his face, splitting wide open the lips above the bared teeth. Again the Kid struck with his broken hand, a blow that flattened Wingy's crooked nose but shot an excrutiating pain up the boy's arm.

The hook, held outward by the Kid's grip, was forcing gradually downward. Abnormally strong in the arms, Wingy had the advantage. Sick with pain, the Kid shut his eyes and sent every ounce of strength into the grip on the hook. His broken hand was now useless. Their straining bodies rolled across the floor against the stove.

The odor of scorched clothes, then a grunt of agony from Wingy as the hot stove burned his arm that locked the Kid's head in a terrific hold. The arm jerked free and the Kid, twisting like a cat, rolled away from him, just as the hook flicked downward in a short arc that would have carried death to its victim.

For the fraction of a second Wingy lay by the stove, sick from the terrible agony of contact with the red hot stove that had burned his upper arm. The Kid's moccasined heel thudded against the outlaw's jaw. As the ugly head banged into the stove, the Kid was on him, sending blow after blow into the battered features that rolled sideways under the crushing force that seemed almost to tear the head from its shoulders.

Blinded by blood and the rain of blows, Wingy sent his last ounce of strength into the vicious jab that buried the ugly hook inches deep in the Kid's shoulder. A sharp cry of pain from the Kid as the hook ripped free. Faint, sick with nausea, the Kid rolled free and staggered to his feet, then fell to lie quiet. Wingy wriggled feebly across the dark floor, burned hand groping for his gun. Pain rendered the outlaw's gun arm all but useless. The terrible burn, eating into nerve and sinew, seemed to paralyze the hand that closed over the gun butt. Realizing that his hook was his most effective weapon, Wingy lay crouched in a ball, breath coming in great sobs, sending the hook out in groping search of its victim.

The ugly steel found cloth. Then Wingy, swift of movement as a wounded cougar, was on it, fighting furiously with his last few ounces of strength that would obey his iron will for perhaps a minute, then leave him beaten. It was his last, his supreme effort. Sobbing, he struck. Again and again that hook ripped, tore free, and sank again in yielding flesh. Then a muffled roar. A dull red flash as a close pressed .45 sent its big slug through Wingy's ribs and tore through the heart beneath.

Hook still buried to the wood in soft flesh, Wingy slumped forward across the other's body. He was dead, even before his battered face thudded against the dirt floor.

A labored, agonized movement of the flesh that shrank from the embedded hook. A shaking, weakened hand pulled the hook free, then relaxed lifelessly.

Labored, sobbing breathing. Somewhere in the dark cabin, a cheap watch ticked loudly. The odor of burned powder, heavy and stifling in the warm, dead air. Outside in the moonlight beyond the clearing, the wolves howled.

VIII

THE KID shuddered into semi-consciousness. Sick, aching in every fibre of his torn body, he lay in the smear of dirt and blood for some time. Weak with pain, ill as if in the throes of a fever, he moved feebly forward on his hands and knees until his throbbing head touched a hard object. It was one of the uprights of Talbert's bunk. He managed to pull himself upright, and sat on the edge, head whirling with dizzy pain.

"Talbert!" he croaked hoarsely, then when no answer broke the silence, he called once more. "Talbert!"

A feeble groan from somewhere. The Kid's groping hand told him that the bunk was empty.

The Kid groped in his pocket until he found a match. As it flared, he cupped the blaze in a broken, swollen hand and peered about in the flickering light.

Two men lay on the floor. One lay face downward, but the Kid knew who he was by the blood-caked hook—Wingy.

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Beside him lay Talbert, bleeding as if torn to pieces by some wild beast. Clutched in one bony hand was a .45.

Then the match seared the Kid's fingers and went out. He lit a second match and after a painful search located and lit the candle. Then he staggered to where Talbert lay in a huddled, blood-smeared heap.

"Dead," mumbled the Kid as he took the white head in his lap. "Dead." Then stupidly—

"Talbert!"

A feeble groan. Talbert's eyelids twitched, then lifted. The sunken, bloodshot eyes looked into the Kid's and Silver Tip Talbert smiled.

"Yuh come back, didn't yuh, Kid? Why?"

"Because I knowed yuh needed me, Silver. I found yore gun where Wingy throwed it. I come back because I knowed yuh was my friend."

"I'm done fer, Kid. I want tuh go out knowin' yo're goin' straight, son."

"Straight, Silver, so help me God!"

Talbert smiled.

"Good. I feel to'rds yuh like yuh was my own kid. I mighta had one like you if things had broke right down in Texas. Goin' fast now. Gotta talk. Turn in that money. Take yore medicine.

" 'Twon't be hard. A few years in stir. Mebby none, bein' yuh give up, willin', and turn in dough yuh could git off with easy. Pete Waters, Chinook sheriff. Square. He'll fix it fer yuh when he knows how 'tis."

He was quiet for some time. The Kid wiped the blood from the old outlaw's lips.

"Mebbeso, Kid—on the Big Tally Book, this'll offset some uh the black marks?"

"It shore will. You're white, pardner. Plumb white."

"No, Kid. Black. There was a time when I was like you. Young an' clean an' reckless. Makin' good. Till she died. The baby died, too. Same night. I was on the roundup. Never knowed she was even sick. Till I comes home a week after. She's asked 'em tuh fetch me, *sabe?* Fetch me so's I'd be with her when the young 'un come. The —— skunk of a boss wouldn't make the ride.

"Said he was too busy tuh go hisse'f an' too short-handed tuh spare a man. I killed him when they told me. Reckon I musta gone clean loco fer a spell. That was my fust killin'. I've killed rattlers an' felt wuss over it than I felt about killin' that cow-man. He had kin-folks. Brothers an' cousins an' sech which took up the fight. I downs three uh them between the bunk house an' the corral where my hoss stands.

"But I'm packin' three-four slugs in me an' the posse ketches me at the rimrock where I'm makin' of a stand. When I runs outa ca'tridges, they gits me.

"The jury gives me life. I serves ten years an' some odd months, then cuts out an' runs fer it. Since then, I bin on the dodge—like a —— coyote. Real law officers like Pete Waters, others that's jest low-down glory hunters a doggin' my tracks, cold-trailin' me. Some fer tuh maintain the law, them others fer what bounty I'd bring, dead.

"Herdin' with skunks like Wingy an' Jude, no home, no friend. Not till yuh come an' I took to yuh an' was weak-hearted enough tuh let yuh th'ow in with us. Because I felt somethin' pullin' inside me when I talked to yuh, I was fool enough tuh let yuh stay so's I'd have yuh tuh talk to me of an' evenin' mebby. That baby—uh hern, he was a boy. He'd uh bin about yore age. I usta pertend, kinda, that you was that baby, growed up."

Talbert's voice had grown weaker until it was but a whisper now. His eyes were those of a man who is very near his God.

"Yore gun—on the floor where the firelight struck it. Knowed Wingy'd—git yuh. I'm glad God gimme the chanct—tuh save yuh, boy. Don't—never kill a man. Black mark, Kid, on the Tally Book. Black marks. I got 'em a-plenty. A-plenty, son. That song—the Lament. Could yuh make out—tuh sing 'er, son?"

The Kid swallowed hard and nodded. With Talbert's tangle of snowy hair on his knees, the old outlaw's eyes fixed on his face, he sang:

"Go gather around you a crowd of wild cowboys,
Tell them the story of this, my sad fate;
Tell one and the other, afore they go f'uther,
To stop their wild roving afore it's too late.

In the grave throw me, and roll the sod o'er me,
For I'm a wild cowboy and I know I done wrong.

The song ended and the singer knew, even before he looked down into his face, that Silver Tip Talbert was dead.

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The CAMP-FIRE

A MEETING-PLACE for READERS, WRITERS and ADVENTURERS

Our Camp-Fire came into being May 5, 1912, with our June issue, and since then its fire has never died down. Many have gathered about it and they are of all classes and degrees, high and low, rich and poor, adventurers and stay-at-homes, and from all parts of the earth. Some whose voices we used to know have taken the Long Trail and are heard no more, but they are still memories among us, and new voices are heard, and welcomed.

We are drawn together by a common liking for the strong, clean things of out-of-doors, for word from the earth's far places, for man in action instead of caged by circumstance. The *spirit* of adventure lives in all men; the rest is chance.

But something besides a common interest holds us together. Somehow a real comradeship has grown up among us. Men can not thus meet and talk together without growing into friendlier relations; many a time does one of us come to the rest for facts and guidance; many a close personal friendship has our Camp-Fire built up between two men who had never met; often has it proved an open sesame between strangers in a far land.

Perhaps our Camp-Fire is even a little more. Perhaps it is a bit of leaven working gently among those of different station toward the fuller and more human understanding and sympathy that will some day bring to man the real democracy and brotherhood he seeks. Few indeed are the agencies that bring together on a friendly footing so many and such great extremes as here. And we are numbered by the hundred thousand now.

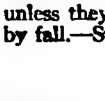
If you are come to our Camp-Fire for the first time and find you like the things we like, join us and find yourself very welcome. There is no obligation except ordinary manliness, no forms or ceremonies, no dues, no officers, no anything except men and women gathered for interest and friendliness. Your desire to join makes you a member.

LEONARD NASON went to France last fall to revisit the ground he had fought over as a member of the A. E. F. and to gather data for more stories of the doughboy. You—particularly you who also were of the A. E. F.—will be interested in this letter from him, written after one of his visits to the battlefields. By "home" he means his temporary home in France. He hasn't said anything yet about returning to this country and is still writing his stories for us on the other side.

Tours, France

I am on my way home from a trip to the battlefields whither I went for a little inspiration. I had heard they were all changed. This is bunk. It seemed as though I had left them yesterday. I found my own dugout, the one I lived in when I was wounded the second time, exactly as I left it, the things in it untouched. Took a photo of it as proof. The fields are still full of unexploded shells, and the men at the cemetery find bodies nearly every day. Since January they have brought in sixty from the woods around Romagne and Cunel. There was a caisson belonging to Number Four piece of C battery of my regiment in the ditch near Aliges. It hadn't been touched since the night we threw it there seven years ago. I hunted around in the woods awhile and found some Boche dugouts I knew of. They were just as clean and dry as they were when I first saw them. Not the slightest sign of deterioration. Wallpaper hardly stained. In one tunnel, a passage under a hill, the floor was littered with machine-gun and rifle clips, rusty of course, but *untouched*. The tourists and souvenir hunters don't get out as far as the Argonne.

The cemetery at Romagne is a beautiful place. There are about 14,000 buried there. Make you think the war cost us something after all, and yet I found an obscure cemetery in the woods with seven thousand German *marked* graves, and two big mounds with a cross that said there were fifteen hundred unknown German dead in each one. The rain was fast washing the names off the crosses and, unless they are renewed, they all will be unknown by fall.—STEAMER.



SOMETHING from H. S. Cooper concerning the "camelotes" of his story in this issue. Also something about Mr. Cooper himself. It is some time since his first story appeared in our magazine. At that time he

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followed custom and was ready to introduce himself to Camp-Fire, but we got caught in a make-up jam and had to take his letter and other material out of that issue. Having gone into type it had escaped from the regular routine and disappeared for a while. But it was recovered and follows his talk about "Camelotes."

San Antonio, Texas.

As to the inquiry in regard to my personal experience with "Camelotes." If you mean voyaging on them—none whatever, thank you! In fact, in all my voyages up and down the Paraná I never saw a human voyager on any of the many I have seen. My story is not, in any sense, an exaggeration of what might occur to a small steamboat caught up in one of these "floating islands." I never saw a camelote of the size of the one in my story as I was never on the Paraná during a "big flood" when the biggest ones come, but I have seen plenty of them an acre or two in extent, some of from three to five acres and two which were estimated as between five and ten acres.

THE boat that I was on followed one of these last two for many miles where the river was narrow as the "Capitan" would not take the risk of passing it. The smaller ones float smoothly and serenely down the middle of the river as a rule, hitting the banks only at bends, but the large ones hit a bank, revolve, elongate, shorten up and twist in a most eccentric manner and without warning, so the smaller river boats take no risks at all as, even if they are not in any danger of actual entanglement, the camelote will throw out large chunks of itself—roots, moss, shrubs, llianas, etc.—not nice things to get tangled up in the paddle-wheel or rudder.

As to the actual "voyagers" on these camelotes I can certify as to these, and the list I have given in my story is a long way from full in detail. I had full opportunity in the case of the large one we "followed" to examine fully every bit of it with a pair of fine field-glasses and I saw a large number of wild pigs, dangerous tusked brutes, alligators that were all of seven to ten feet long, caymans (a species of alligator or crocodile) nearly as large, pythons (boas) that ranged from four or five feet to one monster that, as nearly as could be estimated, was fifteen feet long. Also, there were fer-de-lances, coral snakes and spitting adders—all easily recognisable by color or shape—in quantities, and as for lizards, the thing was alive with them, from big fellows four feet long to very small scutters all of them on the go as the camelote neared a shore or twisted and turned. There were only a half-dozen or so of monkeys and they roosted at the tops of the few trees—they knew when they were safe! There were a few birds, evidently those who had nests in the trees and bushes.

TO UNDERSTAND a camelote you must realize its origin. The Lake Ybera swamp lies on the east side of the Paraná River just below where the Alto Paraná and the Paraguay unite to form the Paraná—Argentina's largest river and one of the large rivers of the world. This swamp, the second largest in South America, is "land bound" along its eastern edge, while its western edge forms the east bank of the Paraná for many miles, therefore, as the swamp grows internally, it pushes out into the river channel and the current of the river breaks off pieces which float down it. There are more or less "camelotes" going down the Paraná after every rainy season in Paraguay and Brazil—where the Paraguay and Alto Paraná have their headwaters but, when there is an extra heavy rainy season in these countries or in northern Argentina, the rivers and the swamp become immoderately swollen and it is in such seasons that the swamp shores farther out into the river, the river current is much swifter and stronger and the camelotes are largest.

There is no warning of the launching of a camelote, the last few roots or llianas which bind the loose section to the swamps, snap noiselessly under water and it floats out as quietly as a bubble and it must do this very suddenly and swiftly as every one of these, of any size, contain some unwilling passengers. I have often seen the swell from the "kick behind" paddle-wheel of an up-river boat wash pieces loose, some of them as big as an ordinary house lot.

THE interior of the Ybera! swamp is actually "lousy" with such animals as I have named above. I was idot enough one year to join a batty lot of bug, reptile, bird and plant hunters sent out by the Argentine Government to explore the swamp and bring out specimens of its "fauna and flora." Never again! By following drains and open waterways we penetrated nearly fifty miles into the morass and I saw enough of the "f. and f." and the Indian inhabitants to last me all my life. It *was* wonderful and strange and I would not *now* have missed it for anything, but "a million a minute and all expenses paid" would not tempt me to try it again and I'm no tyro at exploration of strange places!

Lastly, to go into veritable history. In the middle '80's, the year of an unprecedented rainy season and high water in all the three rivers, a camelote turned itself loose which owned the Paraná for days and almost stopped navigation above Paraná and Rosario. It was estimated to contain nearly fifty acres and when it came just above Buenos Aires it took the south channel which washes the north portion of the city and went aground at Palerino Park, then the finest and most aristocratic suburb of the city. The inhabitants of the camelote went ashore joyously and unanimously and the inhabitants of Palerino Park and its vicinity woke up to find themselves so beleaguered that they dared not move out-of-doors, so sent mounted servants into the city for aid. The city sent its police force armed with machetes, clubs, pistols and rifles and it was three days before the last of the invaders was killed and the list included every critter I have mentioned above. All that is a matter of city record and it is not the only time that such a thing has occurred.

So, a camelote is no figment of my imagination but a constant source of annoyance and even great danger on the Paraná.

MOREOVER, there are a number of well authenticated instances of small boats, even small up-river craft, having been enmeshed in camelotes during the night and carried down the river. Some were finally landed on the sand-banks and mud shoals which choke up the estuary known as the La Plata River and one or two have been actually carried out into the Atlantic Ocean and

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their crews rescued there. For it is dangerous to life and boat to attempt to rescue, on account not only of the possibility of the rescuing boat becoming enmeshed also but, principally, on account of the danger from the animals, especially the boas and the five kinds of poisonous snakes and those most fearless and ferocious beasts the "jascalas," the wild hogs.

So much for Señor Camelote. Some day when I have time and feel like it I'll tell you a story, a true one, of the Piranha, the man-eating fish of the Paraná, the Alto Paraná and the Paraguay. It was told me by a Paraguayan *gaucho* and I've seen enough of both Piranha and *gaucho* to know that it was true!—H. S. Cooper.

Your request for an "Introduction" of myself to the "*Adventure* Family" was duly received and I am glad to oblige—although there is not much to tell.

I AM English born, my birthplace was on the Isle of Wight in the English Channel, at the foot of the great "South Downs" (high, rounded, grassy hills), from which comes the famous "Southdown" mutton. I do not think that there is much in early environment as I have never been fat and tender—as is this mutton; I am six foot five and never weighed over two hundred pounds and have always been "tough," physically, I mean.

Came over to this country in 1864; folks settled in western Michigan about six miles above Grand Haven, wild country then, fine game country and plenty of wolves—old gray fellows. Across Grand Bayou from our house was an Indian reservation—Chippewas—and we kept powder, shot, caps and flints and traded with the Indians for "peltries"—furs. Boylike, I took to the wild life like a fish to water, started in trapping for furs, and got in with the tribe, one old sub-chief adopted me with the usual rites and three years he and I trapped all up and down the peninsula. Once we reached Cheboygan—then spelled "Sheboygen," crossed over to Bois Blanc, thence to Macinac and to the north mainland, tramped over to the "Soo"—and tramped back again. Most of the tramping was on snowshoes for that west side of Michigan is a snowy country.

I've always thought that these trips were quite something for a boy "rising thirteen;" anyway they put the "wild life" so strongly in my blood that my folks went back to civilization at Burlington, N. J., and put me to school.

THREE years of this was enough. I started in as office-boy in a wool firm in Philadelphia, learned to "grade" wools, was sent to Colorado, New Mexico and Texas to buy and grade and ship wools, spent three seasons at this and was so successful that the firm sent me to Mexico to buy and ship "Burry Mestiza" wool—it would take too long to tell you what that is, or was, but it made a rich man of my boss and he sent me to South America to buy wool, hides, llama, guanaco and alpaca hair and skins. Started in at Cartagena (a beastly hole, then!), traveled Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chili by boat, mule, jackass, horse, coach, man-back and on foot as far south as Santiago, crossed the Andes in the middle of winter at the Tupangato Pass—and most died in doing it—got down to Mendoza and took the railroad there for Buenos Aires. Made that headquarters for my business and spent nearly a year there and traveling to sheep and cattle country in Uruguay, Paraguay and south Argentina. Took a trip up the Paraná River as far as the Iguazu Falls (higher than Niagara and a big volume of water), came back to Corrientes and went up the Paraguay to Concepcion and bought hides, fell in with a party of Argentine Government explorers who, with about a hundred soldiers, were going to investigate the El Chaco (the Pitcomao River region) and that is one——of a region if any one should ask you! Snakes, monkeys, alligators, jacares, cannibals, head-hunters, man-eating fish, a biting or stinging bug for every day in the year and the opportunity to catch one or more of seventeen kinds of fever!

I CLEANED up the boss's business to his satisfaction, I had nearly two years' salary untouched, the boss gave me a handsome present, I had made a little on the side and that—nearly—ten thousand dollars was burning a hole in my pockets, so I discharged myself and went up the east coast, Sao Paulo, Rio, Bahia, Pernambuco, Maranhao, Pará and thence up the Amazon as far as white-folks boats ran—and that is a good long way, over a thousand miles. Knew some folks at Georgetown, British Guiana, so stopped off there and made a trip to the biggest cataract in the world—the one on the Essequibo River. Heard about some ruins in the lower part of Mexico and the upper part of Central America, and a party of us went out and saw them, lots of them; took us nearly three months. Craved some civilization, came back to the U. S., got married and tapered off my wanderings by aiding Col. Rose dredge the Kissimmee River in Florida, and fully explore the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee. Since then I have been a domesticated animal—except that I like to disappear for a month or so, now and then—if it is possible—"which is always isn't." Have been located in Texas for the last eighteen years and have traveled the Southwest wherever an automobile can be coaxed to go—and I am a good coaxer! And now to you and the other members of the *Adventure* Family, I walk up to the Camp-Fire and say: "How!"—and when that is said from the heart, it is a whole pageful of friendly greeting! Heartily yours—H. S. Cooper.

IN THIS issue we venture an experiment—a short story translated from the French. We have no idea of turning extensively to translations from other languages. Probably this and one other story by Claude Farrère will be our only samples, at least for some time to come. But we like to keep this magazine of ours open-minded and ready to try out anything within our general field that may add variety or lead the way to some improvement.

The literatures of other countries of course contain many stories that we who gather at Camp-Fire would enjoy and feel belonged in our magazine. But, even with

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adequate machinery for research and translation, proper selection for our purposes would not be easy. In the average neither the American nor the foreign reader finds the story of the other's literature wholly satisfying in structure, treatment, point of view. These two very short ones by Claude Farrere are perhaps particularly adapted to testing the strength of this difference in demand.

This wee experiment can not be conclusive in itself. It amounts, in fact, to nothing more than a presentation of the general question. If those who gather at Camp-Fire are sufficiently interested (I doubt whether as many as one per cent. of those who read our fiction fail to sit in at Camp-Fire), we can experiment further. If not, no harm done.

AS FOR previous instalments of "Days of '49" we have at Camp-Fire what were originally the footnotes for the fifth instalment of the story:

Part II

Chapter XI

It was not uncommon for a lone horseman to lasso and kill a grizzly. In speaking of the California horse, Lieut. Revere in his *Tour of Duty* says.

"The severest test of those qualities is his behavior in attacking a bear, a feat often undertaken by a single ranchero, without other aid than his horse, his inseparable friend the riata (lasso), and the accustomed knife worn in his garter. Thus equipped, he will lasso the largest and most furious bear; and, drawing the brute to a tree, and taking a turn or two around him, will despatch him with his knife, while the sagacious horse keeps the riata fastened to the saddle at its fullest tension. The bear, indeed, is immensely stronger than the horse, and if lassoed by the fore-paw, could be merely standing on his hind legs, draw up several mounted men united by their riatas; but skill and intrepidity accomplish what mere force could never effect."—p. 107.

Chapter XIII

California's most famous bandit was the young Spaniard Joaquin Murieta. "He was but a few months more than twenty-one years of age when he died, and his brilliant career of crime occupied him less than three years. His manner was frank and cordial; his voice silvery and though so youthful in appearance there was that about him which made him both loved and feared, and which impressed both friend and stranger alike with profound respect. Murieta had higher aims than mere revenge and pillage. His continuous conflicts with military and civil authorities, and armed populace, would in any other county in America have been dignified with the term revolution. It is easy to see that he regarded himself rather as a champion of his country than as an outlaw. Joaquin, when in his seventeenth year, became enamoured of the beautiful dark-eyed Rosita Felix, who was of Castilian descent, and sweet sixteen; she returned his passion with all the ardor of her nature. Her hard-grained old father on discovering this amour flew into a rage and would have vented it upon the boy had he not taken flight. Rosita followed her lover to the northern wilderness, assisted him in his efforts at honest living, attended him through all the perils of his unlawful achievements."

Joaquin at first was an honest miner; but a party of Americans entered his cabin, warned him from the camp, beat him unconscious and assaulted his wife. Soon afterward Joaquin rode into a camp on a horse that he had borrowed from his brother; he was accused of having stolen the horse from a miner, protested his innocence, said that he had borrowed the horse.

"He was pulled from the saddle and amid cries of 'kill the thief, hang the greaser,' they hurriedly carried him to the rancho of his brother, whom they summarily launched into eternity from the limb of a neighboring tree. Joaquin was stripped, bound to the same tree, and flogged. He looked around and stamped the features of each of his persecutors on the tablets of his memory. When the executioners had finished their work, they departed, leaving him with his dead. It was then that Joaquin Murieta registered his oath of vengeance which he so relentlessly kept."

There are countless stories of his appalling audacity and cruelty and unexpected kindnesses. Sometimes there were as many as eighty horsemen attending him, at other times he rode alone into towns and camps. He, and his even more ferocious lieutenant, Three-Fingered Jack, were surprised by rangers and killed.

"For purposes of identification, the head of Joaquin and the mutilated hand of Three-Fingered Jack, were severed from the bodies, and, preserved in spirits, were brought to San Francisco in August 1853. The head was placed on exhibition, as the following notice, which appeared in the papers of the city on the 18th of August, and for several days following, will show:

> Joaquin's Head is to be seen at King's, Corner of Halleck and Sansome Streets.
> Admission one dollar."
> —Bancroft's *California Pastoral*. p. 645 seq.

"The execution was conducted by the jury, and was performed by throwing the cord, one end of which was attached to the neck of the prisoner, across the limb of a tree standing outside of the Rich Bae graveyard, when all who felt disposed to engage in so revolting a task lifted the poor wretch from the ground in the most awkward manner possible. The whole affair, indeed, was a piece of cruel butchery, though *that* was not intentional, but arose from the ignorance of those who made the preparations. In truth, life was only crushed out of him by hauling the writhing body up and down, several times in succession, by the rope, which was wound round a large bough of this green-leaved gallows. Almost everybody was surprized at the severity of the sentence, and many, with their hands on the cord, did

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not believe even *then* that it would be carried into effect, but thought that at the last moment the jury would release the prisoner and substitute a milder punishment. Many of the drunkards, who form a large part of the community on these bars, laughed and shouted as if it were a spectacle got up for their particular amusement. A disgusting specimen of intoxicated humanity, struck with one of those luminous ideas peculiar to his class, staggered up to the victim, who was praying at the moment, and, crowding a dirty rag into his almost unconscious hand, in a voice broken by drunken hiccough, tearfully implored him to take his 'hankercher,' and if he were *innocent* (the man had not denied his guilt since first accused) to drop it as soon as he was drawn up into the air, but if *guilty* not to let if fall on any account.

"The body of the criminal was allowed to hang for some hours after the execution. It had commenced storming in the earlier part of the evening, and when those whose business it was to inter the remains arrived at the spot, they found them enwrapped in a soft white shroud of feathery snowflakes, as if pitying Nature had tried to hide from the offended face of Heaven the cruel deed which her mountain-children had committed."—*The Shirley Letters.*—p. 155.

Chapter XVII

Quoted by Cleland in his *History of California.*

Major Rucker in his report to the War Department tells of how scouts broke through snow and rescued women and children and men so stricken they could remain in saddles. *Senate Document* 52, xiii *of U. S. Government Document, Thirty-First Congress, 1st Session.*

"Tales of distress were brought by each arrival, told not in words only, but by the blanched and haggard features, until California was filled with pity, and the government combined with the miners and other self-sacrificing men in efforts for the relief of the sufferers. Emaciated men, carrying infants crying for food, stopped to feed on the putrefying carcasses lining the road, or to drink from alkaline pools, only to increase their misery, and finally end in suicide."—Bancroft's *History of California.* Vol. vi. p. 154.

Chapter XX

"I was in many camps down to 1854, and in none did I ever know of a theft of gold, and I heard of but one, and that was punished by a cat-o'-nine tails, which was afterward nailed to the center-post of a trader's tent, as a warning to evil-doers."—E. G. Waite. *Pioneer Mining in California. The Century Magazine.* Vol. xx.

William T. Coleman, Chairman of the San Francisco Vigilance Committees of 1851, 1856 and 1877, relates that when he went to the mines in the summer of '49 he "noticed large piles of goods outside the stores and tents, unprotected, and I asked if they were left out all night and were safe. The answers were all affirmative. The doors of houses had no locks, or they were unused; the tents had no fastenings, yet there were no losses of property, as every trespasser knew that in theft he would hazard his life. This I afterwards found was the condition all over the country. The miner without fear or hesitation would leave his bag of gold-dust under his pillow and go to his camp for a day's work. Reports of robberies and assaults soon became common."—*San Francisco Vigilance Committees. The Century Magazine.* Vol. xxi.

"The fact is that the Americans who precipitated themselves upon California at that time were the very flower of the American people. They were young men, or men in the very prime and vigor of manhood, for the trip at that period, both by land and sea, presented difficulties which had charms only for the supple and adventurous."—Col. Ayers in *Gold and Sunshine.* p. 341.

One '49er records that a gold watch and chain being found on a trail near camp, it was suspended by the finder to a branch of a tree overhanging the trail and remained there several days until the owner himself chanced by.

"It is simply and literally true, that there was for a short time in California, in 1848, when crime was almost absolutely unknown, when pounds and pints of gold were left unguarded in tents and cabins, or thrown down on the hillsides, or handed about through a crowd for inspection. Men have told me that they have known as much as a wash-basinful of gold-dust to be left on the table, in an open tent, while the owners were at work in their claim a mile distant."—Shinn's *Mining Camps.* p. 119.

OUR Camp-Fire Stations are spreading steadily over the map. Help make them grow. Any qualified person can start a Station.

A STATION may be in any shop, home or other reputable place. The only requirements are that a Station shall display the regular Station sign, provide a box or drawer for mail to be called for and preserve the register book.

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A Station bulletin-board is strongly to be recommended as almost necessary. On it travelers can leave tips as to conditions of trails, etc., resident members can post their names and addresses, such hospitality as they care to offer, calls for any travelers who are familiar with countries these residents once knew, calls for particular men if they happen that way, etc., notices or tips about local facilities and conditions. Letters to resident members can be posted on this bulletin board.

Any one who wishes is a member of Camp-Fire and therefore entitled to the above Station privileges subject to the Keeper's discretion. Those offering hospitality of any kind do so on their own responsibility and at their own risk and can therefore make any discriminations they see fit. Traveling members will naturally be expected to remember that they are merely guests and act accordingly.

Keepers answer letters only if they wish. For local information write "Ask Adventure."

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139—St. Petersburg. Capt. Lee Whetstone, Hotel Poinsettia.
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289—Monticello. O. E. Wells.

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82—Baltimore. Joseph Patti, Jr., 4014 E. Lombard St.
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274—Everett. Aubrey S. McLellan, 4 Marion Place.

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79—Lansing. Geo. H. Allen, *Lansing Industrial News*, 109½ N. Washington Ave.
106—Gaylord. Sidney M. Cook.
131—Muskegon. James Fort [Forsyth, Forsythia, R. F. D. No. 3.
137—Flint. O'Leary & Livingston, 309 So. Saginaw St.
192—Pickford. Dr. J. A. Cameron, The Grand Theater.
227—Adrian. S. N. Cook, 221 Clinton St.

Minnesota—112—St. Paul. St. Paul *Daily News*, 92 E. Fourth St.
311—Canby. Joe Millard, Minnesota State Fair.
145—St. Cloud. P. T. Tracy, 426 Eighth Ave. N.
299—Minneapolis. Russell Hearne, 411 First Ave. N.

Mississippi—88—Tunica. C. S. Swann, Tunica Plumbing & Electric Shop.
99—Picayune. D. E. Jonson.
268—Pascagoula. C. E. Walter, 239 Orange St.

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94—St. Louis. C. Carter Lee, M. D., 3819 Olive St.
127—Salem. Emmet C. Higgins, 100 N. Tenth St.
289—Nevada. T. S. Hope, 705 N. Clay St.

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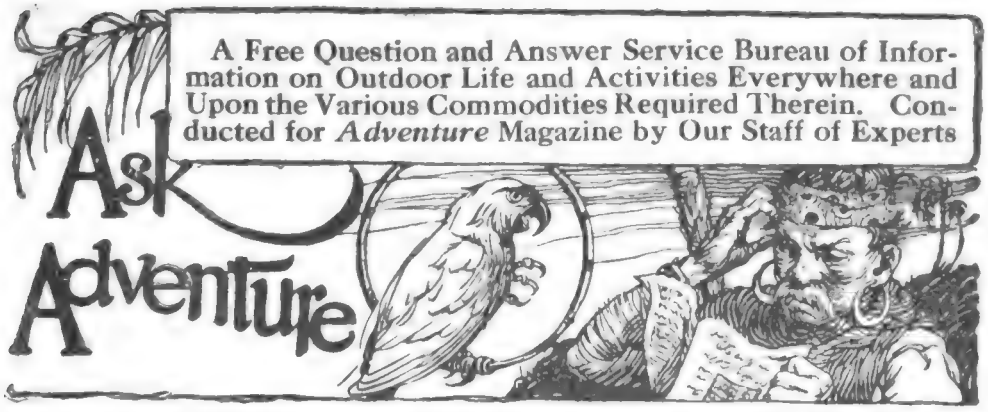
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HOWARD A. SHANNON, care of *Adventure*. Okefinokee and Dismal, Okranoke and the Marshes of Glynn; Croatan Indians of the Carolinas. History, traditions, customs, hunting, modes of travel, snakes.

68. Eastern U. S. Part 4 Southern Appalachians
WILLIAM R. BARBOUR, care *Adventure*. Alleghanies, Blue Ridge, Smokies, Cumberland Plateau, Highland Rim. Topography, climate, timber, hunting and fishing, automobiling, national forests, general information.

69. Eastern U. S. Part 5 Tenn., Ala., Miss., N. and S. C., Fla. and Ga.
HAPSBURG LIEBE, care of *Adventure*. Except Tennessee River and Atlantic seaboard. Hunting, fishing, camping; logging, lumbering, sawmilling, saws.

70. Eastern U. S. Part 6. Maine
DR. G. E. HATHORNE, 70 Main Street, Bangor, Me. For all territory *west* of the Penobscot river. Fishing, hunting, canoeing, guides, outfits, supplies.

71. Eastern U. S. Part 7 Eastern Maine
H. B. STANWOOD, East Sullivan, Me. For all territory *east* of the Penobscot River. Hunting, fishing, canoeing, mountaineering, guides; general information.

72. Eastern U. S. Part 8 Vt., N. H., Conn., R. I., and Mass.
HOWARD R. VOIGHT, 35 Dawson Ave., West Haven, Conn. Fishing, hunting, travel, roads; business conditions, history.

73. Eastern U. S. Part 9 New Jersey
(Editor to be appointed.) Topography, hunting, fishing; automobile routes; history; general information.

74. Eastern U. S. Part 10 Maryland
LAWRENCE EDMUND ALLEN, 201 Bowery Ave., Frostburg, Md. Mining, touring, summer resorts, historical places, general information.

A.—Radio

DONALD MCNICOL, 132 Union Road, Roselle Park, N. J. Telegraphy, telephony, history, broadcasting, apparatus, invention, receiver construction, portable sets.

B.—Mining and Prospecting

VICTOR SHAW, Box 958, Ketchikan, Alaska. Territory anywhere on the continent of North America. Questions on mines, mining law, mining methods or practise; where and how to prospect, how to outfit; how to make the mine after it is located; how to work it and how to sell it; general geology necessary for miner or prospector, including the precious and base metals and economic minerals such as pitchblende or uranium, gypsum, mica, cryolite, etc. Questions regarding investment or the merits of any particular company are excluded.

C.—Old Songs That Men Have Sung

A department for collecting hitherto unpublished specimens and for answering questions concerning all songs of the out-of-doors that have had sufficient virility to outlast their immediate day; chanteys, "forebitters," ballads —songs of outdoor men—sailors, lumberjacks, soldiers, cowboys, pioneers, rivermen, canal-men, men of the Great Lakes, voyageurs, railroad men, miners, hoboes, plantation hands, etc.—R. W. GORDON, 4 Conant Hall, Cambridge, Mass.

D.—Weapons, Past and Present

Rifles, shotguns, pistols, revolvers, ammunition and edged weapons. (Any questions on the arms adapted to a particular locality should *not* be sent to this department but to the "Ask Adventure" editor covering the district.)

1.—**All Shotguns**, including foreign and American makes; wing shooting. JOHN B. THOMPSON ("Ozark Ripley"), care of *Adventure*.

2.—**All Rifles, Pistols and Revolvers, including foreign and American makes.** DONEGAN WIGGINS, R. F. D. 3, Lock Box 75, Salem, Ore.

3.—**Edged Weapons, and Firearms Prior to 1800**, Swords, pikes, knives, battle-axes, etc., and all firearms of the flintlock, matchlock, wheel-lock and snaphaunce varieties. LEWIS APPLETON BARKER, 40 University Road, Brookline, Mass.

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E.—Salt and Fresh Water Fishing

JOHN B. THOMPSON ("Ozark Ripley"), care of *Adventure*. Fishing-tackle and equipment; fly and bait casting and bait; camping-outfits; fishing-trips.

F.—Forestry in the United States

ERNEST W. SHAW, South Carver, Mass. Big-game hunting, guides and equipment; national forests of the Rocky Mountain States. Questions on the policy of the Government regarding game and wild-animal life in the Forests.

G.—Tropical Forestry

WILLIAM R. BARBOUR, care *Adventure*. Tropical forests and forest products; their economic possibilities; distribution, exploration, etc.

H.—Aviation

LIEUT.-COL. W. G. SCHAUFFLER, JR., 2940 Newark St., N. W., Washington, D. C. Airplanes; airships; aeronautical motors; airways and landing fields; contests; Aero Clubs; insurance; aeronautical laws; licenses; operating data; schools; foreign activities; publications. No questions answered regarding aeronautical stock-promotion companies.

I.—Army Matters, United States and Foreign

FRED. F. FLEISCHER, care *Adventure*. *United States:* Military history, military policy. National Defense Act of 1920. Regulations and matters in general for organized reserves. Army and uniform regulations, infantry drill regulations, field service regulations. Tables of organization. Citizens' military training camps. *Foreign:* Strength and distribution of foreign armies before the war. Uniforms. Strength of foreign armies up to date. History of armies of countries covered by Mr. Fleischer in general "Ask Adventure" section. *General:* Tactical questions on the late war. Detailed information on all operations during the late war from the viewpoint of the German high command. Questions regarding enlisted personnel and officers, except such as are published in Officers' Directory, can not be answered.

J.—Navy Matters

LIEUT. FRANCIS V. GREENE, U. S. N. R., 245 Bergen Street, Brooklyn, N. Y. Regulations, history, customs, drill, gunnery; tactical and strategic questions, ships, propulsion, construction, classification; general information. Questions regarding the enlisted personnel and officers except such as contained in the Register of Officers can not be answered. International and constitutional law concerning Naval and maritime affairs.

K.-American Anthropology North of the Panama Canal

ARTHUR WOODWARD, 1244 ½ Leighton Ave., Los Angeles, Calif. Customs, dress, architecture, pottery and decorative arts, weapons and implements, fetishism, social divisions.

L.—First Aid on the Trail

CLAUDE P. FORDYCE, M. D., Falls City, Neb. Medical and surgical emergency care, wounds, injuries, common illnesses, diet, pure water, clothing, insect and snake-bite; industrial first aid and sanitation for mines, logging camps, ranches and exploring parties as well as for camping trips of all kinds. First-aid outfits. Meeting all health hazard, the outdoor life, arctic, temperate and tropical zones.

M.—Health-Building Outdoors

CLAUDE P. FORDYCE, M. D., Falls City, Neb. How to get well and how to keep well in the open air, where to go and how to travel. Tropical hygiene. General health-building, safe exercise, right food and habits, with as much adaptation as possible to particular cases.

N.—Railroading in the U. S., Mexico and Canada

R. T. NEWMAN, 1001 Park St., Anaconda, Mont. General-office, especially immigration, work; advertising work, duties of station agent, bill clerk, ticket agent, passenger brakeman and rate clerk. General information.

O.—Herpetology

DR. G. K. NOBLE, American Museum of Natural History, 77th St., and Central Park West, New York, N. Y. General information concerning reptiles (snakes, lizards, turtles, crocodiles) and amphibians (frogs, toads, salamanders); their customs, habits and distribution.

P.—Entomology

DR. FRANK E. LUTZ, Ramsey, N. J. General information about insects and spiders; venomous insects, disease-carrying insects, insects attacking man, etc.; distribution.

Q.—STANDING INFORMATION

For **Camp-Fire Stations** write LAURENCE JORDAN, care *Adventure*.

For general information on **U. S. and its possessions**, write Supt. of Public Documents, Wash., D. C., for catalog of all Government publications. For **U. S., its possessions and most foreign countries**, the Dept., of Com., Wash., D. C.

For the **Philippines, Porto Rico**, and customs receiverships in **Santo Domingo** and **Haiti**, the Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Dept., Wash., D. C.

For **Alaska**, the Alaska Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, Central Bldg., Seattle, Wash.

For **Hawaii**, Hawaii Promotion Committee, Chamber of Commerce, Honolulu, T. H. Also Dept. of the Interior, Wash., D. C.

For **Cuba**, Bureau of Information, Dept. of Agri., Com. and Labor, Havana, Cuba.

The **Pan-American Union** for general information on **Latin-American matters** or for specific data. Address L. S. ROWE, Dir. Gen., Wash., D. C.

For **R. C. M. P.**, Commissioner Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Ottawa, Can. Only unmarried British subjects, age 18 to 40, above 5 ft. 8 in. and under 175 lbs.

For **State Police of any State**, FRANCIS H. BENT, JR., Farmingdale, N. J.

For **Canal Zone**, the Panama Canal Com., Wash., D. C.

National Rifle Association of America, Brig. Gen. Fred H. Phillips, Jr., Sec'y, 1108 Woodward Bldg., Wash., D. C.

United States Revolver Ass'n. W. A. MORRALL, Sec'y-Treas., Hotel Virginia, Columbus, O.

National Parks, how to get there and what to do when there. Address National Park Service, Wash., D. C.

For whereabouts of **Navy men**, Bureau of Navigation, Navy Department, Wash., D. C.

New Guinea

WHERE there dwells a wingless bird not unlike an emu.

Request:—"Could I bother you with a few questions on New Guinea?

(1) What animals are most commonly sought by hunters?

(2) Has the entire island been explored?

(3) What diseases are most common?

(4) About what percentage of the population are whites?

(5) Are savages still in existence?

Assuring you that your answers will certainly be appreciated, I remain"— ——, Los Angeles, Calif.

Reply, by Mr. L. P. B. Armit:—No bother at all, for I like replying to letters from other parts of this cheery old globe. A letter written so definitely as yours is, giving your queries in intelligible form, is a joy that comes very rarely to me, and I enjoy answering it.

1. Animals are few in New Guinea. The jungle hog, wallaby, and the cassowary (a wingless bird not unlike an emu) are the biggest game in Papuan jungles and forests. Few people hunt them except for meat as they have no commercial value.

2. No. A vast area still shows white on the map. New Guinea is the *largest* island in the world—and the roughest to travel in. The Territory of Papua is well explored, but the Dutch and former German sections are practically unknown except around the

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few coastal settlements. Australia owns the Territory of Papua and her sons have done wonderful work in exploring and opening up this portion of the immense island.

3. Malaria is the commonest disease. Such tropical joys as Yaws, Elephantiasis, Hookworm, Dysentery, Filaria, Beriberi, Stomatitis, and various forms of Ringworm provide the medical men with much interesting study. Malaria takes many forms—all nasty.

4. Papua has roughly 1,000 whites amongst 300,000 black, brown and yellow humanity. The neighboring territories—Dutch and the ex-German sections—have less whites and more discolored men.

5. Yes. The whole island is inhabited by Stone Age peoples.

Don't consider coming to New Guinea if your nerves are raggedy. Los Angeles is much nicer in every way for timid or cautious folk. To those with a taste for adventure New Guinea offers her best: a vast unexplored island—continent filled with a most interesting people, great silent jungles, tremendous mountains, unknown rivers, and wealth in gold, silver, osmiridium, plumes, and lands. But it is hopeless trying to wring a fortune out of the grim island without being possessed of sufficient coin to make a proper start. New Guinea has no time for the lone hand prospector. The newcomer must be armed with coin to pay his way for at least a year after his arrival—or to purchase a steamer fare when the malaria chases him to the pleasanter southern latitudes of Australia.

The full statement of the departments, as given in this issue, is printed only in alternate issues.

Guns

AN ASSORTMENT of questions and answers about shooting irons that should contain something of interest to every firearms fan.

Request:—"I am enclosing illustrations of two rear sights and want to know if these are the ones you mentioned in your last reply. Marble's adjustable rear leaf sight for rear barrel slot in .405 Winchester rifle and 30-30 Winchester carbine and rifle. And also Lyman No. 1A Combination Rear Sight which I believe is the one you suggested for 30-30 carbine. Also the Lyman No. 48 Micrometer Receiver Sight for .405 Winchester Rifle.

2. As to size of bead on front sight, please advise on 30-30 carbine and .405 rifle.

3. Would you suggest an ivory or gold bead front sight on a Colt Single Action Revolver?

4. Where could I purchase an all leather cartridge belt—genuine leather?

5. Could a Colt single action .45 be operated by tying back the trigger and thumbing the hammer to explode the cartridges?

6. Could a .405 Winchester be purchased with a wood forearm such as supplied by the Winchester Arms Co. to the Russians in the early part of the war?

7. What is your opinion of Audley Patent Military and Police Holsters?

8. Also of Heisers Mexican Loop Safety Strap Holsters?

9. What is your opinion of .380 Cal. Colt, Savage and Remington Automatic Pistols?

10. Are they likely to jam in operating?

11. Were any Sharp's Rifles calibred .45—120—550?

12. Please give me the best make in a black powder rifle single shot calibres 45-70 .50-110 and 50-70. Also front and rear sights and size of bead on front sight.

13. Do the Winchester people make a single shot rifle with No. 3 round barrel 27 inches long pistol grip shotgun butt steel checked butt plate ivory bead windgauge front sight also winch, telescope sight caliber 30-30, 45 70 and .405 calibers. How much do you think this rifle would cost?"—IVAN MILLER, Peoria, Illinois.

Reply, by Mr. Wiggins:—1st. Yes, the sights marked in your advertisement are the ones to which I referred, and which I have found by practical use to be the best adapted to my personal use for the arms mentioned:

2nd. I like a bead of 1/8 inch diameter for a hunting front sight, altho its larger than most shooters prefer. My eyes are poor, and for a quick shot I like a large bead:

3rd. I would prefer the gold bead on the revolver, as they get more hard knocks than a rifle, it seems to me:

4th. You will be able to secure a belt, all real leather and of genuine oldtime frontier quality from the following man:

Capt. A. H. Hardy, 2345 Elm st., Denver, Colorado.

He is a saddler of the old school, one of the finest living shots, and knows the real way to put up belts, holsters, and scabbards; try him.

5th. Yes, the act you describe, known as "fanning" is certainly possible, but accuracy is only comparative, and that at the closest ranges, say ten feet.

6th. I believe a specially ordered Model 1895 Winchester could be had with the musket forearm, but would suggest a personal letter to the factory to make sure.

7th. I do not care for the Audley patent holsters, considering them too complicated for quick work, and if I don't need a gun quick, I'd rather have a flap holster.

8th. Heisers Holsters are very good, I find; you make no mistake in using one.

9th. I like this, the .380, the best of all the pocket automatic pistols, and find it accurate and powerful enough for self-defense purposes. As to the jamming of the pistols, I believe poor ammunition, or that affected by oil, is to blame for most of the jams, unless the pistol is in poor repair. Personally, I use the Remington, no jams yet.

10th. As stated in No. 9, I have had some little trouble with jams in the automatic .380 pistol, but believe ammunition was to blame. Many users of these pistols never clean them, use any old sort of cartridge, oil either too heavily so they catch dust and grit, or not at all and leave them dry; I use nothing but the "oil-proof" ammunition, oil lightly, and never make any other alteration in the mechanism than to polish the friction surfaces well with a razor hone. Hence, I now have no trouble.

11th. Yes, there is a Sharp rifle here in Salem for the old .45-120-550 load.

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12th. The best single shot rifle I ever saw or used seemed to me to be the Sharp-Borchardt, the hammerless. Next was the single shot Winchester, altho I never saw it made in the .50-70 size, or those, I liked the old 50-70-450 Sharp the best: for sights, a rear Lyman folding Marbles in the rear barrel slot, and a ⅛ inch ivory bead front would be my ideal combination of sights.

13th. I believe the Winchester firm make now only .22 single shots; you could secure an old one and have a barrel of different caliber fitted, however, as I think they still have spare barrels at the Winchester factory. The lineup, as described, sounds very attractive, but I really can't make a guess at the possible cost of the outfit.

Philippine Islands

WHERE one man had to drink hot water for almost three years but liked it just the same:

Request:—"Will you please give me the following information about the Philippine Islands:

1. What precautions should I take as far as the climate is concerned? I think I am already well acclimated to the tropics, as I have just returned from four years in the Mexican oil fields.

2. Which will be the cheapest way to reach Manila? I would prefer to sail direct from New York, if possible. Can you give the names of several steamship companies I may apply to for information?

3. How can I learn details of the trading, that is, what is exported to U. S. and exported to P. I. from the U. S.?

4. Can I get along there without knowing Spanish?

5. How do living expenses in Manila compare to New York's? What kind of currency have they in use today?

Thanks in advance for this information and am enclosing self addressed envelop with postage inside."—I. M. Reguenga, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. Connor:—1. Of the physical aspect of the Philippines there is but little known in America, except among those who have soldiered, or have been in some sort of government service over there.

It is in reality a beautiful land. Its deep tropical forests; its broad and level plains; its mountains that reach into the clouds that are skirted at their bases by slow running rivers, or lazy placid bays or harbors, all give to the newcomers an ever changing vista as they journey throughout that oriental land.

There are but two seasons in the Islands—the dry and the wet. In most parts of the country the wet season lasts from June to October; the dry season from November until May. The farther south one goes the seasons become less marked. The coolest months are December, January and February, while the warmest or hottest are April and May. It is rare that the thermometer reaches 100 degrees F. The death rate in 1922 was reported as 20.14 per thousand. Malaria, smallpox, asiatic cholera and T. B. are the diseases that cause the most deaths. Drink no water that you do not know is safe. I myself drank hot water for nearly three years.

2. Your cheapest route would be *via* Panama Canal on liner operated by Panama Pacific Steamship Co., offices at 1 Broadway, New York City, or on liner *via* Panama Canal operated by Pacific Mail Steamship Co., offices at 10 Hanover Square, New York City, at $270 for the voyage. Either line gives you a view at Havana, Cuba, Colon, Panama, and other interesting sea ports. From San Francisco, Calif., it is a four weeks' voyage with a stop at Honolulu, Hawaii. That passage will cost you around one hundred and ten pounds sterling and you might do better to call on the Toyo Kisen Kaisha Steamship Co., 165 Broadway, New York City. This company can also route through continental Europe to the Orient from New York City.

3. Hemp, cigars, rice, rare lumber, copra (coconut) are sent to all ports in the world from Manila. Our trade with Manila is eatables, dress goods, shoes, automobiles, motion pictures, etc.; a list that is far too long for giving you here.

4. Yes, you can get along very nicely with just English. At the recent civil service examinations of the natives who took that exam. over ninety-five per cent. took it in English.

5. It has been a long time since I passed out any coin to New York hotels, or cafés, but you can secure board and lodging in Manila from $60.00 to $75.00 per month. Understand, that is not living at clubs, or the best hotels. The average cost of board in the provinces is about $45 per month. They use the peso that has a value of about 50 cents gold. Just about as you did in Mexico *viejo*.

Best wishes for a successful trip.

Night Glasses

CLEARING up the mystery of artificial cat's-eyes:

Request:—"In stories of the sea, mention is often made of 'night glasses.' I have often wondered if these are glasses which in some manner neutralise the darkness so that objects can be plainly seen, also whether they are made on the order of binoculars or marine glasses, or if they are merely ordinary appearing eye glasses.

As I understand these glasses to aid vision in the dark, it seems that they would be useful on many occasions, even in a city, unless as I suggest above, they are magnifying glasses and capable of being used only at a distance.

The information I would ask you to kindly supply is, namely:

1. A general description of same, with an outline of their possible uses.

2. Where can they be obtained, and at approximately what price?

3. Can they be used close to an object, or are they used only at a distance?

Some of my remarks may sound rather foolish to you, but to be frank, I have not the slightest idea as to what these glasses really are. A friend of mine who served in the Navy during the war says that he never heard of them. I merely want to settle my curiosity, and any information you may be able to give me will be greatly appreciated.—H. A. Ward, Covington, Ky.

Reply, by Mr. Beriah Brown:—A night glass is a telescope or binoculars with the lense or lenses

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so ground as to concentrate what light there is and thus make it easier to see an object in partial darkness. Of course, in the black dark it is useless. In appearance night binoculars are similar to ordinary marine glasses. They are also magnifying glasses and their use at sea is to pick up distant objects. They can be obtained from any dealer in nautical instruments and in some stores where ordinary marine glasses are sold. Can not give you an idea of the price at which they sell at the present time, probably about the same price as any other marine glasses.

Lumbering in South America

CONSIDERABLE cutting of timber below the line:

Request:—"Would you be so kind as to answer, if possible, the following questions, which I believe come under your jurisdiction as tropical forestry expert of the *Adventure* magazine?

1. In what part of South America is the greater amount of lumbering carried on?
2. What woods are most numerous?
3. Are there any American companies in the field and can you give me their names and addresses?
4. What markets do they ship to and by what means?
5. Is their method of lumbering essentially the same as that used in this country?
6. Can you name any books dealing further with these subjects?"—CHARLES W. Hein, Los Angeles, Calif.

Reply, by Mr. Barbour:—The greatest amount of lumbering now being done in South America is (1) in the Parana pine region of southeastern Brazil, where there are large mills and operations are carried on by the same methods as in our own pine country. (2) Mills at Para, Brazil, which cut logs which are rafted or lightered down the Amazon. They cut principally Spanish cedar, *marubá* (a soft white wood), *fray jorge* (somewhat like oak), *massaranduba* (a hard red cabinet wood) and other species.

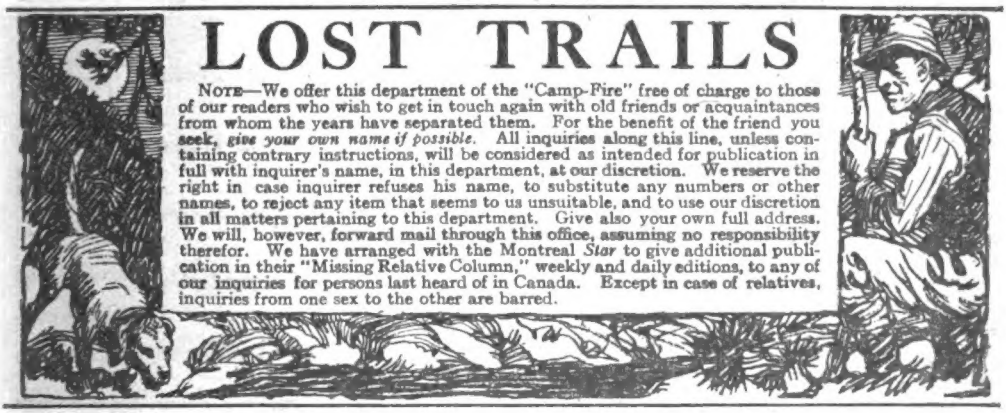
(3) The Guianas, where small mills cut crabwood, greenheart, letterwood, and many other species, but all on a small scale. (4) The Chaco country of northern Argentine and Paraguay, where *quebracho* is logged in vast quantities for utilization in making tannic acid. (5) Colombia, where Colombian mahogany (not a true mahogany) is being cut in increasing amounts.

Most of the Parana pine goes to Brazil and Argentine. The mills at Para ship both to this country and to Europe, besides the domestic market. Wood from the Guianas goes principally to Europe. The *quebracho* is nearly all used in local factories, but some logs are shipped to New York. The Colombian mahogany comes here.

I believe there are American companies in the field, at least in the Parana pine section, but I do not have their names and addresses on file. Most companies are local.

The Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn. has just published "Timbers of Tropical America," by Record and Mell, of the Yale Forest School. It is the first book on the subject, and is crammed full of "meat."

"ASK ADVENTURE" editors are appointed with extreme care. If you can meet our exacting requirements and qualify as an expert on some topic or territory not now covered, we shall be glad to talk matters over with you. Address JOSEPH COX, *Adventure*, New York.



LOST TRAILS

NOTE—We offer this department of the "Camp-Fire" free of charge to those of our readers who wish to get in touch again with old friends or acquaintances from whom the years have separated them. For the benefit of the friend you seek, *give your own name if possible.* All inquiries along this line, unless containing contrary instructions, will be considered as intended for publication in full with inquirer's name, in this department, at our discretion. We reserve the right in case inquirer refuses his name, to substitute any numbers or other names, to reject any item that seems to us unsuitable, and to use our discretion in all matters pertaining to this department. Give also your own full address. We will, however, forward mail through this office, assuming no responsibility therefor. We have arranged with the Montreal *Star* to give additional publication in their "Missing Relative Column," weekly and daily editions, to any of our inquiries for persons last heard of in Canada. Except in case of relatives, inquiries from one sex to the other are barred.

GORDON, J. H. Son, if you do not wish us to lose our girl come at once or write. Failing fast.—Address BARR.

HALE, JIM. Last heard from in Watts, Calif. Was a blacksmith on the Cudahy Ranch, Hetchicera, Mexico in 1920-1921. Any information will be appreciated.—Address L. T. 458, care of *Adventure*.

DONNELLY, JOHN. Last heard from forty years ago, when he was leaving Liverpool, England for the U. S. A. Any information will be appreciated by his sister.—Address MRS. E. RAFFERTY, Wilkona, Calif.

GREENE, JAMES WILLIAM. Missing three years. Age 39 years, born in Savona, New York. Has gray eyes and dark hair. Any information will be appreciated by his son who has news for him.—Address OLIN GREENE, R. F. D. No. 1, Bath, New York.

BOGGS, JACK J. Last heard of in Los Angeles, Calif. Any information will be appreciated by his father.—Address V. E. Boggs, Dublin, Texas.

MEN OF THE 22ND U. S. INFANTRY, CO. G, who served in Alaska and Texas, and were acquainted with Pvt. Charles T. Matthews, please write.—Address ARCHIBALD MATTHEWS, 701 Keen St., Zanesville, Ohio.

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SPRAGUE, W. A. Last heard from at Toronto, Canada. Please reconsider and communicate with me. I wish you would come home and talk things over.—Address MRS. W. A. S., Chicago, Ill.

BUD. Please write, this suspense is unbearable.—Address SIS, Gen. Delivery.

RICHMOND, EARL. Formerly recruiting sergeant in Canadian army during the World War. Last seen by his father in Gulf Lake, Sask., Canada. Was also reported seen in Arkansas in 1920 or 1921. Any information will be appreciated by his parents.—Address MRS. SUSAN RICHMOND, 1702 E. 16th St., Pueblo, Colo.

PERRET or PERETT, FERDINAND. Ex-Provost Sergeant at Portress Ehrenbreitstein, Germany in the army of occupation, member of M. G. Co., 8th Infantry. Please write.—Address J. W. KOSIR, Roy, Montana.

STAPLEY, JAMES. Last heard from in Great Falls and Fort Benton, Montana. Age 47 years, height 6 feet. Any information will be appreciated by his cousin.—Address WILLIAM F. DESAUTELL, 124 Howard St., Buffalo, New York.

LEMLEY, POP. We are dreadfully worried about you. Won't you please write home?—CAROLINE and MOM.

FARREN, JACK. Last heard of in Spokane, Wash., in 1922. Any information will be appreciated by his brother.—Address TED FARREN, care of Empire District Electric Co., Joplin, Mo.

LEDERER, ABRAHAM. Missing from his home at Bridgeport, Conn. since Dec. 9, 1913. Age 26 years, height 5 ft. 8 inches, weight 170 lbs., dark complexion, black hair, brown eyes, nationality Hebrew, pox marks on face. His trade is fitter in Alteration Dept. on ladies' cloaks and suits. Last employed in Springfield, Mass. for one year ending Sept., 1913. Any information will be appreciated by his parents.—Address MR. & MRS. ARLE LEDERER, 90 Miles St., Bridgeport, Conn.

WILLIAMS, E. Let me know where you are. I want you. Get letter from *Adventure*.—EVE.

THE following have been inquired for in either the August 10 or August 30, 1925 issues of Adventure. They can get the name and address of the inquirer from this magazine.

ANDERSON, John Howie; Augustine, Miss Elizabeth; Baldwin, Chas. or Joe Herbert; Beale, Arthur; Bloomenthal, James; Bolan, Thomas; Briggs, Charles Harvey; Card, Frank; Clark, Tom (Slim); Culberson, Albert James; Fitzgerald, Lewis C.; Gillespie, James, John, Myles; Herridge, Albert; Holmes, Perley (Pus); Johnson, Theodore, William, Oscar and Irene; McCarroll, Chas.; Manuel, James; Norsworthy, Tom; Ryan, Ernest W.; Schabarum, Leo P.; Stockman, Ed and Hardy; Van Heldren, T. C.; Williams, Ernest.

MISCELLANEOUS: Arthur; Dewers, Jack, Marty McGee, Arthur Harriss; Luis, Shipp family.

UNCLAIMED MAIL: H. Dan Hoff; Robert L. Russel.

THE TRAIL AHEAD
SEPTEMBER 30TH ISSUE
Besides the new serial and the three complete novelettes mentioned on the second contents page of this issue, the next *Adventure* will bring you the following stories:
THE PEARL OF EVIL DESIRE
Frederick J. Jackson
Men hated, fought and died for it.
DAYS OF '49 Conclusion
Gordon Young
Hales comes to journey's end.
KELP
Captain Dingle
The captain's fist was too ready and his temper too quick.
SUPERLATIVE SAVVY
Alex McLaren
He said he could commit a perfect robbery.
A WHITE MAN'S NIGGER
David Thibault
Every one had loved the murdered old man.

THE THREE ISSUES following the next will contain *long* stories by W. C. Tuttle, Robert Simpson, John Murray Reynolds, Hugh Pendexter, Thomson Burtis, Charles Victor Fischer, William Byron Mowery, Talbot Mundy, H. Bedford-Jones, T. S. Stribling and Bill Adams; and short stories by Alan LeMay, Charles Tenney Jackson, Wilkeson O'Connell, Barry Scobee, James Parker Long, Leonard H. Nason, Captain Dingle, Fairfax Downey, Arthur O. Friel and others; stories of range detectives in the cow country, revolutionists in South America, white traders on the Fever Coast, slave ships in torrid waters, aviators in the oilfields, fur finders in Siberia, white scalpers in the Six Nations, doughboys on the Western Front, able seamen off Cape Stiff, Yankee psychologists in Central America, Cæsar's soldiers in the English Channel, adventurers in old France, daring men in dangerous places up and down the earth.

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